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January, 1928
Vol. LVIII No. 1

Everybody's

WILLIAM CORCORAN
Editor

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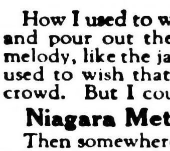

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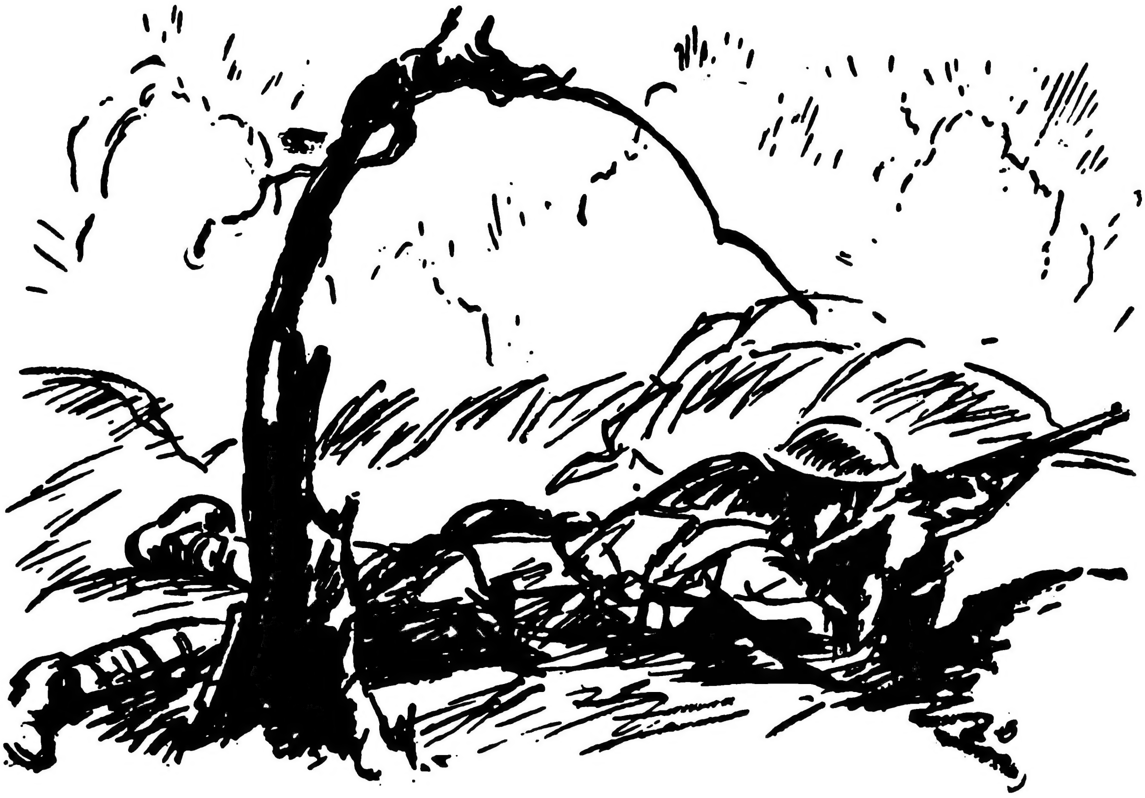


An Ironic Tale of the Front Lines

Silhouettes

By ARED WHITE

HAROLD was frightened when the first mad flurries of passion came into the village with the early April winds. The world about him suddenly had been transported to a place of terrifying, red-fanged beasts, monstrous Frankensteins, savage hob-goblins that came howling out of the dark ages to trample the weak and innocent under foot.

Then as the spring wore on and the frenzy of hate all about him burned at a white heat, Harold felt the contagion of bitterness growing within himself. An impersonal, holy hate; a hatred of those intangible, unseen fiends that were laying waste to fair lands across the seas.

He was seventeen; one of those tall, gangling youngsters who spring at a bound out of childhood into the physical stature of a man. A bookish youth, mentally alert at school and quick to learn profound things, and yet not free of the dreams that hover about a mother's apron strings. He felt it all in an indefinite hazy sort of way, without analyzing it, this new vitality of hatred that was in the air—hatred of that evil omen that stood silhouetted hideously against the skyline of civilization.

It made him unhappy, unsettled him at times. But that there was anything he should do about it did not come to him. Men were forming to go forth and conquer the beast. The village was astir with beating drums and blaring bands, with the hurry and scurry and frantic commotion of an unprepared country suddenly summoned to arms. The stream of marching men behind the bands grew longer day by day—some of them, men and boys, Harold knew by name. Yet no thought came to him that he might be one of those men. Those were the rugged fellows who had played at strong games rather than the sort that buried themselves in books.

Harold's awakening to the stern reality of his stature as a man began on the morning of graduation from high school. As he went proudly that morning to take his place at the head of the graduating class, and claim the ripe honors he had won by hard study, it was to find himself ruthlessly put aside by another lad—one who had flunked out miserably in those last three months of school.

Young Clifford, the youngster who had been threatened with dismissal only a month before unless he quit dreaming his way through classes, took that coveted place at the head of the class. Clifford, placed there by the school principal himself without explanation! Clifford wore the uniform of a private of infantry, a uniform he had gotten only the night before from the recruiting party in the village.

Teachers and students flocked about Clifford, their eyes aglow with adulation, as he exhibited his bayoneted rifle which the captain had let him carry to school this morning. He demonstrated its firing mechanism proudly and ran his fingers suggestively along the blunt edges of the long thin knife blade that was to challenge the beast.

Harold stood alone, forgotten, until Clifford himself suddenly saw him and came rushing over with noisy greeting.

"The cap'n has got room for a few more first class fighting men!" Clifford exclaimed. "Want to come along and join up with F Company?"

"I'm—not old enough," Harold gasped, completely bewildered by the strange proposition.

Clifford winked at him slyly. "You're as old as me—that's eighteen when you're talkin' to the cap'n. What's a few months between friends when there's something like this in the air?" Clifford's voice warmed and his eyes glowed. "A trip across the ocean in a big ship, see Paris, see Berlin, see the big adventure with all expenses paid and thirty dollars a month to spend on the side. You can't miss anything like that, Harold!"

Harold shifted from one foot to the other. He was ill at ease. "I don't think mother would hear of it," he replied at length, as if that should settle the matter.

"Ha!" Clifford's voice was derisive. "Mamma's boy! With the country in danger, with the wolves howling to tear us all to pieces, you'd stay home, would you? Come on, Harold, there's something out here in the office I want you to take a good look at!"

He took Harold by the arm and half dragged him to the principal's office. On the wall was an ornamental hanging cloakrack, in the center of which was a large mirror. Clifford brought Harold to a halt in front of the mirror and pointed.

"I want you to take a good look at it—so you'll know what it looks like when you hear people talking about it!" he exclaimed wrathily.

"What—what is it you mean?" the dazed Harold asked. He was able to make nothing of Clifford's strange antic. He saw only his own image reflected back at him.

"A damn slacker!" snapped Clifford. He let go of Harold's arm and stamped in high dudgeon out of the room.

A FAT, florid man on the deck of an army truck was exhorting a crowd at a street intersection as Harold, sick at heart, made his way home from school that afternoon. The man's hands were clenched, his arms waved fervidly, his body shook from head to foot under the passion that moved his voice. Harold recognized the mayor of the town. His heavy feet brought him to a stop in front of the scene and he stood listening with rising pulse as the speaker went on.

"Civilization, that precious flower that sprang from the blood of our fathers, stands in peril," the mayor shouted. "The crimson heels of the Prussian beast tramples in the fair garden of democracy and threatens to uproot Christianity itself. I will now ask Reverend Hall to pray for our country—for men to defend our shores!"

The mayor yielded his place to the pastor. The preacher stepped forward, raising his hands to the sky and looking aloft beseechingly. The gesture was fervor itself.

"God give us men!" the pastor cried. "God fill our ranks with Christian soldiers to protect Thy teachings from the wrath of the barbarian—God give us men to protect civilization—to protect the work of the ages—to protect our wives—our children—our mothers—from the lust of the beast! Amen."

The pastor lowered his head and stretched his arms imploringly to the men about the army truck. "Let us uncover," he pleaded, "while the band plays 'Onward, Christian Soldiers'. May its noble message bring into your souls the strength and the inspiration to see your duty. When the band has ceased playing, let all able-bodied, single men who love God, who love our country, come forward and offer themselves on the precious altar of duty that we may preserve the heritage of our fathers."

Those strange passions that had stirred Harold vaguely in the past suddenly crystallized in Harold's mind. As men stood rigidly silent, their heads bared, he felt his blood throbbing to the magic of the band. Tears welled into his eyes and blinded him so that he saw only in a blur. A hot rush of emotion swept him until he trembled like a leaf. It came to him all at once that he must go. In the silence that followed the last lingering note of the music, Harold moved forward impulsively and climbed onto the army truck. A cheer rose from the throat of the crowd at sight of him, a lusty cheer that intoxicated him as he realized that the cheering was for him. He was the answer to the pastor's prayer. He had offered himself. His life now was in the balance against the beast.

The glamour of the scene faded with the crowd. The heavy truck jolted off towards another corner, the band following on foot, the mayor and pastor in a limousine. This city was backward in yielding its quota of volunteers. The draft would be along presently, but the first regiments must be hurriedly filled up with volunteers and rushed across to bolster up the failing Allied lines.

An undersized man in a sergeant's uniform jumped out of the truck and motioned Harold to follow. The sergeant escorted him through the city to a large bare room that once had been a store. Over the door appeared the legend "Enlist Here." Behind a table in the center of the room lounged a middle aged man in uniform. He had a kindly face except for the eyes which were cold and searching. Harold's escort brought his hand to the brim of his campaign hat.

"Pickin's is slim this afternoon, Cap'n," the sergeant said. "This is all we got—but the mayor says maybe it'll be better when the men come out in the open after work hours."

The captain dipped his pen without comment and looked Harold over in quick appraisal. He asked him terse questions; name, address, vocation, and filled in the answers briefly on the enlistment form.

"What's your age?" he asked in matter of fact tone, without looking up from his desk.

"Seventeen years," Harold replied in the mild, piping little voice that had taken possession of his throat.

The captain raised his head slowly and looked at Harold with level, insinuating eyes. "If you are closer to your eighteenth birthday—you are eighteen," he said. "If you are not eighteen you shouldn't have taken up valuable time trying to show off. What is your age?"

Harold gulped. His face and hands were clammy. Conflicting emotions had been pounding in his brain since the moment the truck had moved away from that cheering crowd. What would his mother say? The thought had hit him with the sting of a blow as he came here with the sergeant. It was the first time in his life he had failed to take her into his confidence. As a matter of record, Harold was one month past his seventeenth birthday. It was only honest to say so. He had been taught scrupulous honesty. That sly wink of Clifford's rose in his mind and the scene before the mirror at the high school office. He saw the crowd again, hats in the air; and the ring of their voice cheering him for a hero. He realized suddenly that there was no turning back now.

"Eighteen years," he gasped.

"Good!" exclaimed the captain, marking the age down. "You really look somewhat older than that."

The officer led him into a small back room where a doctor in uniform checked his body over deftly. The doctor listened to his heart action, looked into his mouth, thumped his chest, measured and weighed him, carefully taking down the result of each observation. When he had finished this the medical officer checked the inventory over with a dubious air.

"Not much of a physical specimen, this one," he said to the captain. "A full ten pounds too light for his height and his chest expands less than two inches."

"Nonsense!" snapped the captain. "You're getting so you expect everybody to be a Greek god. Waive chest and weight and mark him fit for service!" He turned to Harold with a sharp command. "Hold up your right hand and be sworn into the service."

Harold stood with ashen face, the hand above his head trembling in spite of his efforts to control it, while the captain administered the oath that bound him to the service for the duration of the national emergency. It was a brief and informal ceremony, without emotion or glamour, the captain speaking the magical word in a prosaic monotone.

"You can run along now," the captain announced after shaking Harold's hand in welcome to the service. "You've got until nine o'clock tomorrow morning to wind up your affairs, if you have any, and say goodby to your mamma, if you got one. We ship to the cantonment at ten. Be here on the dot. Remember, you're in the Army now."

ON THE street outside, alone, Harold shook off the daze that had settled over him and his step became firm, his carriage erect, as he started in the direction of home, bolstering his courage with the thought that he had done the only thing that it was right for him to do when the world was in such a turmoil. But his feet began dragging again and his eyes clung to the pavement dully as he approached his mother's home. He tried to whistle down the growing dread of that moment when he must face her and tell her of what he had done. He tried to reassure himself that she might accept it all calmly; with a few tears, perhaps, but without deep pain, since it was such a sacred duty called him.

He quickened his pace at the sight of his mother standing on the portico waiting, as was her habit when he returned late from school. He saw the anxious look of her face brighten to a smile as he went bounding up the steps to her, a forced smile on his own face. He had decided, suddenly, that he would not tell her at once—not until he had paved the way to a favorable opportunity after dinner.

The smile faded from her face as he went lightly up to her. A look of terror crept into her eyes as she held him at arms' length and searched his face.

"What is it, Harold—tell me what has happened?" she cried, sensing confirmation of the uneasy foreboding that had tormented her all of this afternoon.

"The beasts—mother—I'm going to help stop them," he stammered. "I've enlisted, mother."

Harold reported at the rendezvous the next morning hours ahead of the appointed time. His mother was there with him. There was a show of defiance in her red-rimmed eyes and swollen face. Out of the terrible nightmare of grief and fear that had been the night, she had awakened to a course of action. In her hand she carried the family Bible.

She held the Bible before the captain's eyes with an accusing gesture. "I have brought with me the proof that you have violated the law," she charged him in a low, vibrant voice.

The captain rose slowly from behind the table. He removed a cigar from his mouth and his hat from his head. Sight of Harold standing just behind his mother, made it clear to him the nature of this woman's mission. The experience was not a new one.

"Men are very sorely needed, madam," he assured her calmly. "I presume you refer to your son. He has shown a very fine and patriotic spirit by volunteering for service. I congratulate you that you are not the mother of a slacker in a time like this."

Harold's mother struck back as if she had not heard. "He is not of military age yet—not old enough to face those hardships," she cried. "Since when did war become a thing for little children. Aren't there plenty of grown men?"

"This is an extraordinary war," the captain replied evenly. "We face fiends. There is no monstrosity—no crime they are not already guilty of. This is not a time for selfishness. Your son is a large, strong boy, fully able to do his part. Other mothers are sending their sons."

"I have the proof here he is only seventeen',' she protested. Again she had not seemed to hear him. She held the Bible up to his face. "You have no right to violate the law and take boys under eighteen. I want my son back—or I'll—I'll telegraph President Wilson what you've done."

The captain was unmoved. He replied to her with polite patience.

"It is for you to say, madam," he said, a touch of indifference in his voice. "It would be hard for me to believe that such a fine lad was guilty of fraud against his government. He held up his right hand yesterday and swore under oath that he was eighteen. It would pain me deeply, madam, to see him thrown out with a green ticket—for fraudulent enlistment. I —I hate to see any young man brought into such disgrace as that, affecting his whole later life as it would. But, of course, if you are sure of your proofs—if you want—"

II

THE captain cursed his own folly before the month was over. Harold failed to shape up at all as a soldier and became a drag on the hard-driven company commander—an overgrown infant who tried seriously enough but without results. Harold did not seem able to get his mind and body coordinated at drills. Too often he would get caught day-dreaming and stand there vacantly staring into space through the commands while his squad moved off. When he finally woke up he would go rushing gawkishly up to find his place in line. Not an inspiring sight for an inspector.

There were boys of fifteen and sixteen years in the company, overgrown infants, who were older in conduct than Harold. They cut away from their mammas' apron strings completely, except for an occasional attack of low spirits or a ready cold following wet feet. They developed aggressiveness, the spirit of daring, and took their hard knocks from the squad and section leaders to some purpose, growing visibly, day by day, into ruddy, tough-muscled, almost grown-ups who could put a bit of life and venom into the thrust of a blade on the bayonet course. Harold did little more than wear a uniform that was much too large for him, consume his rations, and cause the captain all the bother of an ordinary squad.

"Get rid of him!" the captain ordered his first sergeant, disgustedly. "Transfer that lout out of my sight, very first request we get for men."

But the next day the captain changed his mind abruptly. It was the First Platoon's first day on the outdoor target range. The men had been put through the position-and-aiming exercises and were ready for their first try at rifle firing. The captain edged over close to Harold. There was a senior officer looking on and the captain, exercising the caution of an experienced company commander, stood ready to bolster up the weakest link in his chain. It was not beyond Harold to drop his piece, or fire into the ground at his feet, or turn his head clear away in flinching and wound someone on the line. It had been impossible to break Harold of the weakness of dodging his rifle at the drills in the manual of arms.

When it came his turn to fire, Harold lifted the weapon awkwardly. The range was 200 yards at the A target, off-hand, standing. He lowered his piece without firing and studied the target. Then he raised it again and after a long period of aiming, fired. The captain looked for the inevitable red flag from the target pit. The white disk of a bull's-eye rose instead.

"Re-mark that last shot on target fifteen!" yelled the platoon lieutenant. It was impossible that Harold had scored a center—unless someone had fired on his target by mistake.

A white scoring disk flashed confirmation. Harold fired again. Another white disk. A third shot brought the same result. The captain became interested and moved closer. Ten straight bull's-eyes followed—the only perfect score on the whole line.

There are mortals who pass for ordinary clay until the day when a whim, as of chance, places in their hands the unaccustomed bow of a violin to release the hidden mainsprings of unsuspected genius. Or perhaps it is the keyboard of a piano over which their untutored fingers are driven by an unseen magic. It may be a gift from the gods or again nothing more than the mastery of forgotten progenitors stirring for expression in the veins of the living.

Harold's miraculous power with a rifle was of such stuff, a strange gift from forgotten forebears. All great geniuses of marksmanship, like the progeny of the muses, are born thus, not made. By the time Harold had completed his string of ten shots at 300 yards, kneeling, he was the center of a wondering group. The captain took him back to 600 yards, lured by excited curiosity. Holding has only a minor part in the technique of driving a bullet straight into a black target the size of a man's head at 600 yards. The weather must be reckoned with, the direction and velocity of the wind, the heat of the sun, the temperature of the rifle barrel from previous firing, the peculiarities of the weapon itself. Firing at the long ranges without a miss is as difficult of execution as a rhapsody by Liszt without the missing of a note.

Nine bull's-eyes and a red four—forty-nine points out of fifty at 600 yards. A miracle! The battalion commander had come up to look on. Junior officers and noncommissioned officers from other companies gathered behind the newly discovered prodigy in rising awe and admiration. Here was a soldier among soldiers, even if he did not look the part; a man who could drive his bullets true to the mark, a sharpshooter who could be depended upon to bore a hole through a human head at a third of a mile or more when the time came. What couldn't he do with proper training! Harold's captain turned from the firing line in sudden recollection and half ran back to the orderly room.

"You haven't transferred Harold out of the company?" he demanded of the first sergeant.

The first sergeant stood up apologetically. "Not yet, no sir," he replied. "But I'll get rid of him some way or other before—"

"Don't do it!" commanded the captain sharply. "Hold onto that man if you value your chevrons, Sergeant. I'd rather lose any ten men in the company."

HAROLD'S mother showed up at the Port of Embarkation when the regiment was ready to jump off into the great adventure. The captain was uneasy when he first caught sight of her but his apprehension left him when he maneuvered near enough to sense her humor. The defiance was gone, along with the inflamed cheeks. Her face was now the color of marble, strangely calm and composed with an indefinable shadow of a smile on her lips and an inscrutable, haunted look in her eyes. He saw her study the expert rifleman's badge, and the division championship shooting medal on Harold's breast, with a sort of reluctant interest, and then walk with the lad very slowly, her arm about his uniformed waist, saying nothing.

Training had done nothing to strip Harold of his raw, gangling appearance, nor of his day-dreaming at drills. But he had ripened as a sharpshooter with the swiftness that is true genius, under the expert technical guidance of Sergeant McGee, the seasoned file who had brought Harold into the service from the mayor's recruiting party, and who took a personal joy in the marvelous achievements with the rifle of his richly endowed protégé. Harold, himself, had responded with a feverish interest to that part of his military training which was set on the target range; often lying through whole days, firing over the long ranges into the paper silhouettes without wanting to stop for midday mess.

The captain told Harold's mother of her son's success in glowing words that must have gladdened the heart of any fond mother. A wonderful lad! Of whom she had a right to be proud. And she was to be congratulated at giving such a man to the service. She looked back at him in silence, the frozen smile on her face, the haunted look in her eyes unchanged.

"Promise me, Captain," she responded, an imploring note in her voice, "promise me that you will take good care of my boy." She laid her hand on the sleeve of his uniform beseechingly. "Please don't let him go about with wet feet—he's such a sensitive, high-strung boy—and he catches cold so easily."

III

HAROLD snuggled close to the earth behind the canvas bags packed with heavy French clay that lay piled in a sparse thicket of leafy young willows. There shone in his face an amused triumph. Just above his head the tepid August air was vibrant with the resentful rasping of unseen hornets. One of those intermittent swarms that came buzzing out of the vicious haunts of those mysterious, moving silhouettes over there among the purple trees that fringed the yellow hillside.

He crossed his legs lazily and brushed a tattered leaf from his pink cheek with a carefree hand. Those stupid, whistling things overhead would not find him. Now and then one came so close that it snuffed out its own silly life with a noisy plop against the clay bags. Others pinged through the willows, wreaking a futile vengeance upon the tender leaflets. But presently they would pass him by, blindly; and again he could raise his head to set those silhouettes dancing on their queer stage against the skyline.

The smile faded as Harold settled back into his make-believe world of rolling white clouds. There were those fantastic actors there in the theater of the heavens who would play for him while he must lie low. He lost himself in his favorite drama of a plumed knight who rode out of a towering air castle astride a caparisoned white charger and swept across the heavens to rescue a lovely maiden from the beast that held her captive in a murky cloud on the rim of the sky. Another familiar dream tableau filled the stage—of a horrible monster in mail, with jagged sword poised ominously across the clouds. It brought back into his ears the never-to-be-forgotten ring of those words that had come, quivering with passion, from the lips of the chaplain at services.

"It is Prussianism we oppose—the multi-legged demon whose sword is forged of the spear that pierced the flesh of Jesus!"

His hand clutched instinctively the barrel of his new Enfield that lay with its muzzle against the bags of clay. He jerked his hand away, flicking his fingers in the air. The barrel was still scorching hot.

The clouds dissolved the mailed dragon into nothingness. Graceful sprites came now, dancing in sylvan glades. Shifts of the wind, high overhead, wafted in the green field at the high school with its throng of capering youngsters at baseball, joyous faces and splashing bodies in the swimming hole in the woods at the edge of the village. His mother standing on the portico waiting for him to come bounding up the steps to her. The scenes shifted slowly so that he could drink in every detail hungrily; and wonder that their full beauty had been hidden from his eyes until now that he saw them only as shadows.

On his mother's face, as it shaped itself against the pinnacle of a fleecy cloud, was that inscrutable smile that had haunted him since that day of sailing. There was an upward turn of the mouth, as of a smile. But the lines of her face were taut and her cheeks were bloodless, and the look in her eyes was not a smile. The words of her parting prayer came back to cheer him.

"May the Lord spare you, my son, from the beasts."

The curtain was rung down abruptly on Harold's dream world by the bellowing voice of Sergeant McGee who lay just under the crest of an ochre hillock twenty yards away. The sergeant was clinging close to the earth now and his voice cracked with terror under the angry tempest of maddened hornets.

"Snap out of it over there—wake up and get into action!" the sergeant yelled. "Them Fritzies got me spotted and I'm catchin' hell!"

Harold listened cautiously for a moment, smiling that the sergeant was so unstrung by the buzzing. Served him right for using such oaths. Harold's ears reassured him that the air was clear now over his own head. He raised himself on his elbow to peer cautiously through the clumpet. His alert eyes searched the fringe of purple trees along the yellow hillside. There was no living thing in sight.

The barrel of his rifle was cooler as he poked its muzzle across the clay bags. He fixed his eyes upon a nearby willow leaf and studied its flutterings intently. Those leaves were allies of his. They told him how the air was behaving, just how to adjust the windage scale on his rifle. He saw that the wind had risen slightly with a mild swerve to the left. He took the veriest fraction more than one full point of windage to the right, raised his sight elevation with the aid of a micrometer, threw the bolt of his rifle with a practiced snap of the wrist and settled back in patient observation. Presently one of those moving silhouette targets would show itself against the bright skyline. He would set it to dancing.

A moving splotch of black silhouetted itself in the open place where the sky met the crest of the yellow hill. Harold had it pinned to the tip of his front sight in a twinkling. He filled his lungs and held his breath so that his aim would not be shaken by the movement of breathing. The silhouette was the size of a pigmy through the distance—another of those grotesque shadows topped with an inverted scuttle—the mark of the beast!

His fingers closed slowly on the trigger until it released the firing pin smoothly. At the crack of the musket that silhouette stood stark still for an instant. Then it lunged crazily back and forth only to drop suddenly like a plummet behind the crest of the hill. He threw his bolt again quickly. Once, earlier in the day, a second silhouette had risen almost in the wake of the first one.

"You got that damn Boche pig!" yelled Sergeant McGee with a gloating laugh. "You ain't missed a Jerry all day!"

THERE followed an empty hour in which the only shadows were those of the purple trees lengthening to the eastward up the yellow hillside. No more hornets came. There was a monotonous rumble, as of thunder or the growls of the beast in the distance beyond the crest and heavy palls of smudge off in the direction where lay Fismes on the banks of the Vesle. A large blue fly droned in on Harold, buzzed about in greedy inspection, then hurried on in its eager quest. There were no other signs of life.

Sergeant McGee wormed his way over to Harold's sniping post, with the reminder that it was three o'clock. That was the hour set for them to move on to a new sniping position, one that overlooked the Vesle. There they would complete their work of cleaning the area of vagrant enemy snipers and laggard Boche patrols.

"We'll get a look at somethin' worth seein' when we get past the top o' that hill," said Sergeant McGee. "There'll be the river below us—with maybe the chance to get the range on a whole flock o' Fritzies crossin' the water."

They moved cautiously up the yellow hillside, crawling and creeping, using the trees for cover as much as possible. It must be reasonably safe to move across the ridge at the top, else they would have been warned by runner. Nevertheless, there was no saying where a skillful sniper might be hiding out in observation far behind the German exodus.

When they came to the crest of the yellow hill, the two snipers made a quick rush, bending low, across the treacherous skyline. As they passed down the reverse slope without drawing fire, Harold straightened up and breathed easily at the reassuring sight of a scattered group of soldiers lying about in the open just under the crest. Their utter unconcern, as he glanced at them casually, told the security of the place. Far below he saw the sparkle of the sun on the waters of the Vesle and the broad, undulating panorama of squatty, tree-clustered hills that sloped to the banks. An ideal location for snipers.

He was in among those resting soldiers, walking easily, when his attention was caught by the fact that they were very young men. The oddity of the uniforms they wore crept upon him vaguely. Those were not the olive drab uniforms he was used to seeing. The peculiar fog-gray hue puzzled him. He looked at them more closely, his eyes centering on the prostrate form almost at his feet. He saw that it was a lad of his own age. Perhaps a year or two younger; a long, gangling youngster whose thin legs were sprawled in a peculiar awkwardness—one leg bent under his body. There was a strange pallor on the lad's face—and Harold became suddenly conscious that the boy's gray eyes were fixed upon him in an uncanny, vacant stare such as he never had seen before on a human face. He opened his mouth to speak to the soldier—asking him—

A cry leaped from Harold's throat, a frenzied outcry borne by the full force of his lungs. It was the cry of a child stricken by terror in the dead of night. Then he stood there, frozen to the ground, staring back in stark, open-mouthed horror into the sightless eyes of the boy on the ground.

The sharp voice of Sergeant McGee broke the tragic spell that clutched him. "Get down there, you damn fool!" the sergeant shouted furiously.

Harold broke at the warning and ran frantically down the hill to the sergeant. His face was livid—a face such as Sergeant McGee had seen once or twice before looking up at him from a stretcher or ambulance.

The sergeant glared at Harold quizzically. "What's got into you?" he demanded. "Don't you know enough to keep under cover an' not stand out there yellin'?"

Harold found his voice with an effort. His words were disjointed, barely articulate.

"Did you—you—see them?" he gasped. His trembling finger pointed to the group of broken German bodies that lay under the crest of the yellow hill.

"You mean them dead Heinies up there?" asked Sergeant McGee. "Say, think I'm blind, maybe? What you gettin' at anyhow?"

"They're dead—dead men," Harold replied in a hoarse whisper, a shudder of revulsion shaking him.

Sergeant McGee's eyes narrowed. His protégé's irrational antics were beyond him. "What's this all about?" he asked irritably. "You tryin' to impress on me that you're the silky haired expert that kilt most of 'em—or is it you're tryin' to act like you didn't think the folks you shot with a thirty calibre rifle was goin' to get hurt!"

The crash of artillery close by sent Sergeant McGee running to cover. He dragged the gaping mannikin that was Harold by the arm and thrust him bodily into a fringe of brush at the top of a protecting rise. The hissing course of the shells in the air told him that it was friendly artillery, gone into action behind the yellow hill. He followed the shrieking trail of the shells with his ears until he picked up the burst.

The sergeant gave an exclamation of joyous excitement. The venomous black and white spurt just over the waters of the Vesle brought to his eyes myriad black dots in the river. The German rear guard was crossing. He threw the bolt of his rifle. An easy target at not more than seven hundred yards. Sergeant McGee began firing rapidly.

"Snap out of that trance!" he shouted at Harold as he lowered his smoking barrel to cram a fresh clip into the magazine. "Get that gun o' yours to working there! The target of a lifetime—a hundred of 'em in sight—a chance to pick up two or three of 'em at a shot if you use your bean!"

Harold moved to the lash of command. He lifted the butt of his rifle heavily to his shoulder and his eyes ran listlessly down the barrel until the silhouettes in the river danced on the point of his front sight. The technique of firing moved him intuitively. He filled his lungs with air so that the movement of breathing would not disturb his aim at the moment of releasing the firing pin.

"Get to shootin' there—whale it to 'em while the shootin's good—if you only wing one he's a goner in that river!" raged the sergeant, as he fed a third cartridge clip into his gun.

Something in Harold's firing technique went wrong. His finger would not close upon the trigger. The silhouettes at the end of his sight suddenly vanished and in their place there rose before his tortured mind, two glassy gray eyes that stared at him uncannily along the barrel of his rifle. His lungs emptied themselves with a convulsive sob. He dropped his weapon with a shudder and buried his face in his arms.

IV

"I'M TELLIN' you, sir," Sergeant McGee protested to Harold's captain, back in the battered wreck that had been the fair French village of Ville-sur-Fère, "I'm tellin' you, sir, it's a plain case o' blue funk, cold feet, weak spine, or whatever you want to call it, sir. That lad simply loses his nerve when he heard them bullets whistlin'. He stood it as long as he could and then he blew up with a bang—and tried to play loco over a few dead Boche."

The captain poked reflectively at the lone candle in the covered stone basement. He weighed, against Sergeant McGee's charge, Harold's calmness that first night the outfit came into this very place to be pounded by German artillery. The best of his men had trembled in terror through their baptism of fire and Harold had laughed it off as being a huge thunder storm.

"Are you sure no high explosive broke close?" the captain persisted. In what was left of the Hôtel de Ville of Ville-sur-Fère, the medical regiment of a line Division had set up its hospital station. The captain had observed, that day, along with the endless lines of moaning litter cases, troops of walking patients who had no wounds. They came back from the reeking front, dumb and staring, bearing the vague diagnosis of shell-shock. He had asked the surgeon about these men—sneering at them as malingerers—but the surgeon shook his head dolefully and swore it was a worse affliction than gun wounds—even if there was no defining its exact causes or gauging the extent of its grim ravages.

"Nary a shell within a thousand yards!" asserted Sergeant McGee emphatically. "Sir, that lad's jest yellow inside. We wasn't through anything worse'n a duck hunt or a picnic—with jest a few Boche slugs singin' in the air. And he stands the sound as long as he could and then played off on me the minute we gets out in sight o' the Dutch. He got close to the ground, sir, and wouldn't poke his head to shoot when we had a real target—and I had to carry his gun back in here. All I get out o' him was a lot o' wild chatter about beasts—a lot of silly stuff like you'd expect from a small kid that's just been told there ain't no Santa Claus. All a cover up, sir—playin' sort of loco so he won't have to risk his skin again. It's a shame, sir, for a man that can shoot like that lad can."

The captain rose abruptly. The enigma had cleared. Out of his long experience in handling fighting men, the solution of this puzzle in weak human nature came to him.

"Bring him here to me at once," the captain directed Sergeant McGee. "I'll put a scare into him that'll make him glad to go out there and put the best he's got into his stuff!"

It was a picture of demoralization that the sergeant, a few moments later, led into the captain's roosting place. Harold's eyes looked out in a hollow stare through black rings. His arms hung limply, his jaw sagged, his whole being reflected despair. His salute, as he came before the captain, was a limp gesture.

"What's wrong with you?" the captain demanded. "Sergeant McGee gives me a very unfortunate account of your conduct today."

Harold stared in dumb silence.

"I asked you a question," snapped the captain. "Answer it!"

Harold stammered painfully. "They're not—not— I don't know, sir," he broke off.

"They're not what!" the captain prompted him sharply. "What's the rest of it? And be sure you talk sense to me!"

"Not—not what I thought—they were," Harold answered with an effort.

The captain glanced at Sergeant McGee. His report of Harold's incoherent chatter had been confirmed. The sergeant winked significantly.

"I promised your mother I would take good care of you," said the captain, changing the subject adeptly lest Harold intrench himself further in this hoax of being unstrung. "I want to keep my word—but from this minute on it's right up to you."

He arose and stood directly in front of Harold, staring straight into his eyes to add force to his words that were to shake Harold back into his senses as a sharpshooter.

"I've put you in the safest job in the Army," the captain went on. "You work behind the lines and you work from good cover. Any bullets you heard whistling today were nothing compared with what you'll get if I throw you back in the company—as a runner."

The captain paused impressively, then went on in a voice that was almost a threat.

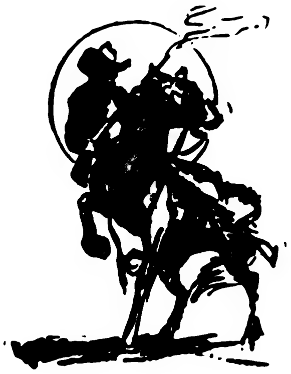
"A runner! Do you know what that means? It means you carry messages right to the assault platoons—and your life won't be worth a snap unless you're awful lucky. You get shot at—without a chance to shoot back. It's up to you! Go out with the sergeant and do your stuff as a sniper—or report to the first sergeant as a runner—and let your blood be on your own hands if you do, not on mine! And get this, too! First time that Sergeant McGee says you're not making good at your shooting—into a runner's shoes you go without further order. Do you understand that?"

The expression of dull torpor in Harold's face had quickened into one of acute fear as the captain spoke. He stood looking almost in terror at the captain for several moments; then with a thick, barely coherent "Yes, sir," he saluted and shuffled his way out of the command post.

The captain smiled at Sergeant McGee reassuringly. "You'll have no further trouble with that lad," he announced calmly. "I've set up a counter fear in his mind that'll make him like sniping after this. There's always a way to handle them if you dope it out right." He drew a map across the table and pointed out to Sergeant McGee the firing points that were to be covered on the morrow. The sergeant marked the points down on his own map. "Get that lad out there at daybreak," the captain instructed the sergeant finally. "Report to me occasionally just how the lad is working—although I'm sure now you'll have no more trouble handling him. Did you see him light up with that scared look? Nothing like a good scare to—"

The first sergeant came into the captain's rookery from the company command post. There was a slight look of annoyance on his face.

"Sir," he addressed the captain, "that pet sniper of the cap'n's was just in. Said he was reportin' to me for duty as a comp'ny runner. When I went to shoo him out he said it was with the cap'n's permission, sir—and I just wanted to make sure it was O. K."



A Complete Novelette

By

CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS

of a Western Man in Action

COYOTE'S BITE

NOTE: The suggestion for Coyote's Bite was actual. This spring Grant County, Oregon, had a plague of mad coyotes. Some cattle, bitten by coyotes, died. Government hunters went in and cleaned up the infected animals. Fred Blair, in the Izee district, was attacked by a coyote in daylight. He was taken to town and Pasteur treatment given.

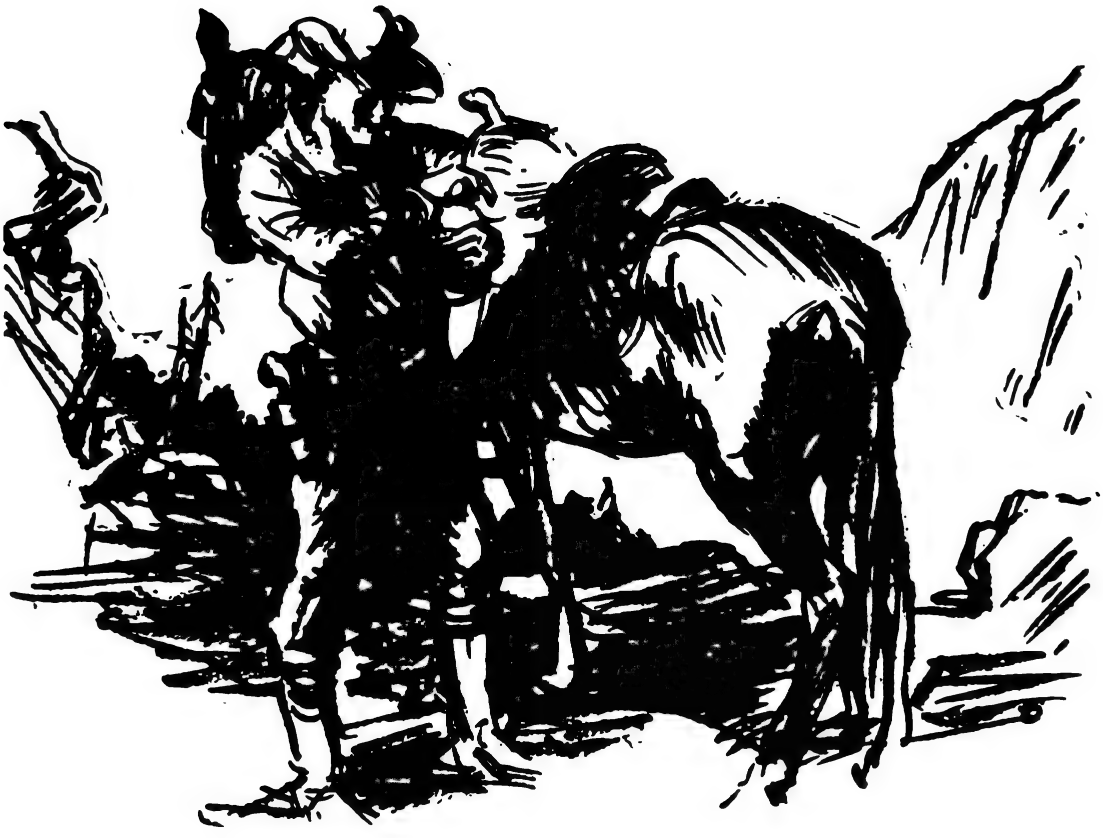
CHAPTER I

"DON'T MOVE!"

HAMMOND dismounted a hundred feet from the cave in which he had hidden his trap. Again he was heartily hoping that he had caught the coyote which he had been trying for two weeks to catch. He had set a trap every night, but the coyote had kept out of it. Coyotes, he knew, were wily enough, but this one had proved more wily than any with which Hammond had had to do. Hammond would almost have given the animal credit for human intelligence, though he knew, of course, in its evasion of the trap, it was merely drawing on the instincts which it had inherited from generations of its ancestors.

The coyotes had seemed more numerous and more daring this year than ever before. Sheepmen had reported heavier losses than they had sustained in the past. Hammond was aware that a coyote was never satisfied with one kill when it attacked a band of sheep. It would wantonly kill as many as possible for the mere enjoyment of slaughter. Hammond was not a sheepman. He didn't care especially what happened to other men's sheep. What he was concerned about was that the coyotes were so savage. One of the most cowardly of animals seemed to have plucked up a good deal of courage.

Hammond had decided to see what he could do to rid the range of some of the pests. He was not an experienced trapper, and he had, after his first failures, consulted with old man Scott, down the creek from Hammond's ranch. Scott had thought that Hammond had failed because he had not exercised enough caution. So, in setting his trap the night before this, he had been as careful as possible. He had restored the vicinity of the trap as nearly to its normal condition as he could. He had worn gloves, so that the man-smell would not betray the hidden trap. Therefore this morning he was hopeful



that his care had brought him a catch.

He was now in the foothills of the Blue Mountains. Behind him was a long, broad valley, a stockman's paradise. Before him were the hills and beyond those the mountains themselves. In the hills and the mountains were countless head of sheep and cattle and some horses. The sheep had to be herded; the cattle and the horses ran free. Within several miles of Hammond there was not a habitation of any kind except an occasional shack.

Just here the hills had rocky outcroppings, and the day before he had come upon a sort of cave in the base of one of the rocks. Here he had set his trap. Now he advanced toward the cave. It fronted to the west, and the opening was in shadow, the sun still being low in the east.

At first, when he stopped in front of the cave, he could not see into it. Gradually his eyes became accustomed to the gloom. He was aware of two glittering things which were as if they had been suspended in that gloom. He knew at once that those were the eyes of a coyote. Slowly the head and then the body defined themselves. Then he could see the whole of the interior of the cave plainly. The animal had been caught well up on the right foreleg. It had been caught, Hammond perceived, as it had cautiously advanced toward the meat which he had placed just beyond the trap.

Hammond was no more a hunter than he was a trapper. He shot an occasional deer for food, and he had sought to catch this coyote because it was a dangerous animal on the range. He was not specially interested in his captive now. His first thought was to kill it immediately, to be rid of it. Then something unusual in the coyote's demeanor attracted his attention. He had expected it to slink from him, but it did not. Instead, it pulled itself toward him on its three free feet, and it snarled like a wolf. Hammond thought that capture had stirred its courage. He had heard that any animal, caught or cornered, would fight. He stepped into the cave and advanced to the coyote as closely as safety would permit. Suddenly the animal leaped, carrying the trap with it. The chain was short and securely fastened, and when it had been extended its full length, the coyote was pulled down and fell on its side. It came to its belly, snarling and whining as fiercely as a wolf.

"By gosh," said Hammond to himself, "I believe that ol' boy is mad."

He meant that he believed the coyote had rabies. He remembered having heard of such cases. When a coyote was thus afflicted, he had been told, it would attack a man in the open. Its bite meant death if prompt medical treatment was not given. So now Hammond retreated. He was forty miles from a doctor, and he didn't want to be a candidate for Pasteur treatment anyhow. He had heard that that was prolonged, and that you had to have a needle jabbed into you every day or so.

Therefore he drew his gun and put a bullet into the coyote. It slumped down dead. Hammond walked up to it and stood looking down at it. For a fact there was something peculiar in its appearance. Its wide-open eyes, even in death, had a wild expression. There was a slaver on the jaws. Hammond did not know whether handling the animal would lay him open to infection, but again he took no chances. He left the coyote in the trap. He would consult Scott again before he attempted to retrieve the trap.

Out in the sunlight he stood looking about him for a moment. The scene was very peaceful at first. Birds flitted and skimmed. The sunlight was now yellow on the hills and in the hollows. There had been a few clouds in the early morning, fleecy masses, but these had now disappeared; and the sky was intensely blue.

Hammond took it all in with a little smile on his lips. He forgot about the coyote. It did not occur to him that if one coyote had gone mad, others might have done so. He was a young man. This country had always been his home. Civilization had not changed this country as it had changed other places nearer to towns and villages. Life here was not much different from what it had been in Hammond's boyhood, fifteen years ago. Hammond hoped it would never change. He loved it. Some might have called the country desolate. It was not desolate to him. He could call by name every bird, every animal, every tree and plant in the whole vast domain.

He found joy in mornings like this. The blue sky, the brown hills, the pine trees, the slopes, and the flats—he could look at them for hours and never grow weary of them. His eyes had been lifted to the sky now, but presently he brought them back to earth. He would have to be getting back home. There was work to do.

HE STARTED toward his horse, stopped. He had become aware of a slinking form in a clump of stunted pines just to his right. Another coyote! And showing himself in a kind of fearlessness to his enemy, man. Doggone, these coyotes certainly were getting gay. These two were more like their brothers, the bigger timber wolves.

And this one was advancing on Hammond. Apparently it had not dawned on his brute intelligence that the man had seen him. He was trying to sneak up on Hammond. Hammond drew his gun slowly, and then he became motionless. The coyote had come to the edge of the clump of trees. It thrust its nose out from them. It went to its belly. Hammond knew that it was about to spring, and he raised his hand and sent a bullet between the eyes. The coyote came into the air six inches, dropped, shivered, and lay still.

Hammond went up to it and examined it. It had the same unnatural appearance as the animal in the trap had had. It, too, had been mad, Hammond was sure. That was borne out by the fact that it had been ready to attack a man in the open.

Hammond was concerned now. This might prove to be a serious situation. He knew nothing about rabies, but he supposed that if a coyote bit a sheep, for instance, or a calf, and that animal lived, it also might develop rabies. In a little panic he visioned the range as overrun with animals of various kinds, gone mad. Well, he had better get his neighbors stirred up about the situation. Instead of going home, he would ride on to Scott's and find out what that veteran knew about such things. Perhaps the government agents ought to be communicated with, so that they would come in and begin a war of extermination.

He hurried back to his horse, mounted, and started for the trail which led to the road to Scott's. He came presently to a creek, gone nearly dry in this late summer time. While his horse bent to drink, Hammond looked about him. His eyes lighted on a cow which was standing at the creek's edge. Its head was bent as it ran its tongue over the head of a calf. The calf was lying on its side, and Hammond saw that one leg was crumpled under it. Something had happened to it.

Hammond was not startled by that. Something frequently happened to calves when they were starting their lives on the range. This was rough country, and the young stock, in a way, began life under a handicap. Hammond supposed that the mother had come down here to drink, probably with the bunch with which she was associated, and the calf had followed her. Somehow it had been injured. Well, he would have a look. If the calf were injured beyond help, he would put it out of its misery.

Hammond dismounted, so that his horse was between him and the cow, and going to the horse's head, he bent down to the calf, keeping an eye on the mother. The mother had lifted her head six inches from the calf, and she stood waiting for Hammond's first move. He took hold of the crumpled leg and straightened it out. It was a limp thing, and Hammond knew that it was broken. He would shoot the calf.

First, however, a little puzzled, he looked about him and beyond him. The bank of the creek was graveled. There were no big stones in sight. He couldn't see at first just how the calf had been hurt. Then, beyond him, he saw marks in the earth. They were the marks of the mother and her calf. From the space between them and the depths they were sunk in the earth, Hammond understood that cow and calf had come running to the creek's edge. They must have been in a panic, and that probably meant that they had been pursued. They had come to the water and stopped sharply. Somehow the calf had twisted its leg so that the bones had snapped.

Hammond backed his horse away and went round the calf and the mother. The cow bent down again and began to lick the calf's head. Leaving his horse fifteen feet from the two, Hammond went on, looking for a sign. Yes, the cow and the calf had come down here hell-bent. Their trail was plain enough back from the creek. There was, for ten feet, no other sign, and then Hammond came abruptly on the hoofmarks of a horse.

This sign was easily read. A rider had come down here in pursuit of the cow and the calf. He had undoubtedly been trying to drive the cow, so that the calf would follow, and the cow had refused to be driven. She had run, with the calf keeping up as best it could. Then the calf had gone down. The rider had not been far behind. He had stopped his horse abruptly, had doubtless seen that the calf was too badly hurt to be driven, and had turned back in the direction from which he had come.

Hammond knew that there had been some rustling in the mountains. He had lost some calves. His neighbors had lost some. Cows which should have had calves by their sides had none. The rustling had begun only a short time ago and it had not been extensive. There had been some talk about taking measures to stop it, but nothing definite had been done so far. Hammond decided he would take that matter up with Scott, too. The various outfits had two jobs on their hands now: To exterminate the mad coyotes and to find the agent who was helping himself.

However, Hammond's immediate task was to dispose of the calf. No use letting the poor little fella lie there and suffer. He would never walk again. So Hammond went back to his horse and threw his gun on the calf. In that instant the calf turned its head. Its soft, young eyes were full of pain and woe, and Hammond felt a great pity for it. He never killed wantonly except in the case of predatory animals, and he did not like this job. He stood there for a moment before he should pull the trigger.

HE DID not pull the trigger at all. There was no preliminary, warning sound behind him. Instead the silence was first broken by an order:

"Don't move!"

Hammond did not move. He was paralyzed with astonishment, for that order had been given in the voice of a girl. This was chiefly a man's country. Hammond knew of only two girls within several miles of him. and that voice, he was sure, did not belong to either of those girls.

"Drop your gun," the voice pursued.

Hammond did not drop his gun. He was too bewildered, now that the momentary paralysis had passed. Why was he being held up? And by a girl? What was a girl doing alone in this unfrequented spot? She must be alone; if she had not been, whatever man had been with her would have staged the hold-up, if he was any kind of man. Doggone, if it wasn't a funny situation!

"Drop your gun, I tell you," the girl went on. "If you don't, I—I'll put a bullet into you."

Hammond correctly diagnosed the situation. His paralysis and his ensuing bewilderment had served him better than any decision he could have come to. The girl had expected to be obeyed. She had not entertained the thought that a man would fail to obey her, when he must know that she would not have issued her orders if she had not been prepared to enforce them. But she had faltered when she had said she would shoot him. Hammond had been aware that her voice was clear, charming, and till she had uttered her threat, it had been steady. Then the steadiness had gone out of it. It had struck a higher, an uncertain note. Unless she lost her head, she would not shoot him, Hammond was sure. And somehow, queerly, he was equally sure that she would not lose her head.

So he did not drop his gun. He turned, slowly, so that she would not be thrown into a panic and do something impulsively which her reason would counsel her not to do. Hammond, at what he saw, had another moment of paralysis. She was a strange figure. She wore a dark-blue blouse and overalls, and she was bareheaded. The sunlight glinted down on hair which might have taken its rich yellow color from the sun itself. Her cheeks were flushed instead of pale; excitement and some anger now had brought her ready color to them. Beneath the blouse her bosom rose and fell swiftly.

Hammond was aware that his blood mounted to his own tanned cheeks. He knew his eyes brightened; they *felt* bright. Doggone, she was a pretty girl, standing there like that!—and courageous, too, for she still kept her gun on him, though he held in his hand his heavy forty-five as against the thirty-two which she leveled at him. Also, though she was in danger now if Hammond proved to be a certain kind of man, she got over her little panic. When she spoke again, her voice was as steady as at first, though it was somewhat husky.

"*Will* you drop your gun?" she demanded.

Hammond smiled. He couldn't help it. Admiration for her surged through him. Would he drop his gun? You bet your life! Far as he was concerned, she could have anything her heart desired. He lowered his hand and let the gun slip from it. Then he reached up and took off his hat.

He was not an especially handsome man. Nobody had ever said he would take a prize for his looks. But he didn't cut so bad a figure as he stood there. His lean body was erect, and his equally lean face was aglow.

The girl eyed him keenly. There was a change in her expression, but Hammond did not know what it meant. It was not a softening exactly. It was, he thought, as if she were asking herself a question, and, of course, in this situation, that question would be about him. Her eyes narrowed and the hard lines of her lips softened just a little.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Hammond is my name, ma'am," he answered. "I got a ranch over here a way."

"What are you grinning about?" she asked.

"Grinnin'? Why, ma'am, I thought I was smilin'."

"See somethin' funny in all this, do you?"

"Why, no, ma'am. I—well, I just—oh, I dunno."

"No, I guess you don't. What were you going to do with that calf?"

"Kill it, ma'am. It has a busted leg."

"Do you know that my father's brand is on that cow?"

In that instant Hammond didn't think anything about the brand. Memory was serving him. He knew who this girl was now. Old Scott had told him a while ago that a new outfit had come into the country. Scott had said the name was Purviance. There was an old man and a girl. They were starting in a small way. Scott had met the father. He was a good ol' fella, far as Scott could make out. He hadn't seen the girl. Prob'ly Hammond would look her up, he intimated, to get in on the ground floor. Girls were scarce. This, Hammond thought now, must be the girl. He hadn't paid any attention to old Scott's gibe, but Scott's random shot had hit a mark. This girl would be well worth knowing. Yes, he would certainly heed Scott's advice.

"Do you know about the brand?" she asked.

He turned and looked at the cow. It was still licking the calf's head, all its maternal devotion expressed in that. He saw that it was a brand new to the country, a lazy P within a circle. He was sure he knew who she was now.

"I didn't notice before, Miss Purviance," he said. "The calf—"

"How'd you know my name?"

"Guessed it. Heard you and your father had moved in on Sandy Creek."

"Yes. Well, what were you going to do with the calf?"

"Shoot it. It has a busted leg."

She scrutinized him for a long moment before speaking again.

"Were you going to steal the calf?" she asked.

"Ma'am, I don't have to steal," he retorted, with dignity. "I got a certain standin' in this country. I can prove it."

"Do you know Mr. Scott?"

Lucky! Her father had doubtless told her about his meeting with Scott, and the father had probably entertained the same opinion of Scott as Scott had entertained of him. Well, Scott would say a word for Hammond.

"You just ask Scott about me," he said.

"Well—" She hesitated. "Take up your gun and shoot the calf if it must be shot," she finished.

He picked up his gun and put a bullet into the calf, while she turned her head. The cow started back from the calf. It had an angry moment and then an uncertain one. Hammond took advantage of that uncertainty. This was no place for a man and a girl afoot. He hopped his horse as the cow began to shake her head. Then he swooped down on the girl, stopped the horse, bent, and lifted the girl up before him. She bent back so that she could look into his eyes. He held her only so that she would not fall, wheeled his horse, and galloping up the bank of the creek went away from there.

CHAPTER II

WARNINGS

THE horse carried them swiftly away from any danger from the angry cow. Her dead calf was near. He who had exploded a bullet into the calf was soon many feet away. The departure of the man with the gun seemed to take him out of the cow's reckoning. She turned back to the calf.

Looking back, Hammond saw that, and he stopped his horse. He was aware that he had his arm about the girl's waist. He was tempted to keep the arm there for a second or two. Then he reviled himself for that thought. Pretty specimen he was! He slipped to the ground and gave her a hand, and she slid down. Hammond was a bit flustered. He forgot that he had done the only thing he could do, in the circumstances. His fear was that the girl might not think so. She, however, was not flustered. She eyed him coolly.

"Well," she said, "I guess you are all right, Mr. Hammond. You don't lose any time in an emergency, do you?"

"Mebbe not," he said.

"What're you blushing about?" she queried.

"Me? I ain't blushin'. It's the sun, I reckon."

He saw that she was a spirited girl and had a sense of humor. She liked to have her little joke. He had no inclination to retort in kind, however. The fact was that Mr. Hammond was hit. She was certainly a good-looking girl, and she had all the other qualities which he had always thought he would like in a girl. So he didn't feel any gayety as he returned her look. This was a solemn moment in his life. He had a notion that he had met the "one" girl and he had an additional notion that the meeting wasn't going to do him a bit of good. As soon as report of her got about the country, she would have a host of admirers. A man would fall over them whenever he went to the Purviance ranch. And there were some clever fellows in the various outfits. A number of them could dance. Several could sing a little. One played the guitar. The picture of the Purviance ranch house that came into his mind was colorful. Singing, dancing, the music of a guitar—and he not gifted at all in any of those arts. Not very hopeful that.

"Can you sing and dance, ma'am?" he asked.

"Now?"

"Well, no! Gosh, I got funny thoughts. Well, about this calf stealin', ma'am. What do you know about it?"

"Why, we have only a few cows," she said. "Till last week we had half a dozen calves. It's a new country to us, and my father and I have been keeping track of our stock. Either he or I rode each morning to see if we could locate them. Day before yesterday I located the cows, but the calves were missing. Father had gone out the day before and had found cows and calves."

"Somebody drove the cows away and the calves followed," Hammond said. "Then the cows were turned loose to drift back to their range. There has been some stealin' goin' on. I will have to look into it. You want to stay close to home, ma'am. This rustler may be bad medicine. If he is caught in the act, he will put up a fight. You just leave him to me."

"My father wouldn't want you to fight his battles," she said. "He is able-bodied and not afraid of a fight."

"It's my own battle," he returned. "It's everybody's battle. Somebody is takin' our young stock. Pretty soon he will drift away with it. He has got it holed up some place. I will have to find that hole. There is another thing I must warn you about, ma'am. I killed a coupla coyotes this mornin'. I think both of them was mad."

"Rabies?" she asked. "I've heard about that. Coyotes are dangerous when they are infected."

"I know it. One I shot was all ready to put up a fight. He would have jumped me if I hadn't shot him."

She stood looking down for a moment, and he saw twin lines of worry come between her eyes. When she looked up at him, there was also a cloud of worry in her eyes.

"I don't know just what to do," she said. "My father is one of the old-timers. You know what that means if anybody steals from him."

Hammond knew what that meant. The law was fairly well seated in the saddle in this country. Purviance had lived in the time before the coming of the law. His impulse would be to deal directly with a cattle thief, especially if he caught him in the act of stealing. Hammond understood why the girl was worried. She didn't want her father to take direct action. That would only mean trouble for him.

"We better not tell your father," he suggested.

"What would people think if there was a hunt for this thief and my father didn't join in it?" she asked. "Also what would my father think if there was a hunt, and he was not invited to join in it. On the one hand he would be furious and on the other people would be scornful. What're you going to do about that?"

Well, now, wasn't that just about the fittin'est thing? Why, Hammond would have to play a lone hand. He would have to get on the trail of this festive cattle thief and round him up. He wasn't gifted in small graces, but he had a little gift for trailing. He would take a shot at it alone.

"Suppose there is more than one thief," the girl said, when he suggested that to her.

"There ain't more than one," he said, and he was profuse in argument to show her that he could not be mistaken about that.

She seemed to accept his arguments as sound. He noticed that she cast down her eyes as she assented, but he supposed she was just thinking when she did that. It didn't occur to him that she might be hiding a betraying light that had leaped into those eyes.

"What shall you do first?" she asked.

"I better get you home. Then I'll start."

"Oh, nothing will happen at this time of day," she objected. "A thief wouldn't be cruising around in broad day. He probably works in the dawn and the dusk. I meant, what'll be your first move?"

"Why, I ought to take a look at the trail that fella left down there by that cow and calf," he said.

"We'll get my horse and go down there," she agreed. "My horse is up on a bench back there."

IN A few minutes they had her horse and they returned to the creek bank. Hammond stopped at the spot where the man who had been pursuing the cow had halted. He and the girl looked down at the marks in the earth. They were distinct here and Hammond found that they led up the bank and away from the creek.

He drew his horse to one side of them and followed them till the rock began back from the creek. Here he had to dismount, and the girl came down by his side.

"Don't you pay any attention to the sign," Hammond told her. "Keep your eyes open. That fella might be lurkin' about, and another coyote might show up."

"All right," she said obediently.

He glanced at her suspiciously. Was she amused by his caution? Maybe she liked a daring fellow. But she wasn't smiling. Her face was serious as she looked about. Hammond believed that she was prettier than ever when she was like that. He shook himself impatiently. Doggone it, he mustn't go to day dreaming. He had a job on his hands. He must devote himself to it.

He crossed the rocky surface carefully, and only once did he find anything that he could definitely believe was a sign. That was a piece of rock whose edges seemed to have been recently crushed. He was quite sure that a horse's hoof had come down on it. There was no way of deciding on the direction of the horse from that, however, and he went on to where the rock ceased and the earth began again. There were no imprints here.

He turned back and went across the rock in the other direction. This was sand and sage. The sand was light and it had filled in where a horse had stepped, but there was a broken clump of sage, which confirmed the evidence of the imprints. The trail led down to the creek. The water in the creek was running clear now, and the trail was of course lost.

"He did the natural thing," Hammond said. "He hit the creek as soon as he saw that calf wasn't worth stealin'."

"He hadn't rounded up any more cows to drive this morning then," the girl said. "He couldn't have kept them in this small creek bed."

"That's right," Hammond agreed. "He prob'ly come on this cow when she was driftin' down to water with her calf by her side. This fella knows he can't make any extensive thefts. He is just nibbling here and there as he gets a chance. A calf or two a day, though, would be enough to give him a start by the time he is ready to drive them away."

"I've heard that all the brands in this country have been called in now," she said.

"They haven't been turned in yet," he said. "We got till September. There are lots of old brands that are never used now, and they will be taken out of the book. This fella is prob'ly familiar with the brands hereabouts, and he could pick one to suit himself. Well, ma'am, only thing I see to do is to lay for this fella. No use doin' anything till late afternoon. Then I will sift about and see what I can uncover."

"You might get Scott to help you," she suggested. "He wouldn't talk. You could say you and he were hunting coyotes."

"I'd kinda like to play a lone hand for a little bit," he said.

"Why?"

"Oh, I dunno. Just a notion."

She smiled at that; he laughed; and then she laughed. He thought there was beauty in her laughter. It rippled and rang softly. He didn't think there would be anything tragic in what he was going to do. This cattle thief probably was yellow and would throw up his hands or run if a jam impended. The government could take care of the mad coyotes if necessary.

"You can ride home with me if you want to," she said.

That'd be fine. He would get in on the ground floor. She was a sensible girl, and she might pick a man for substantial qualities rather than for entertaining ones.

Ahead of them was the broad valley; behind them the hills and the mountains. The fragrance of the pines was in the air. Birds skimmed and swung. A crow, probably having come near the nest of a redwing blackbird, beat a retreat when the blackbird darted at him from above.

"The son of a gun!" said Hammond.

He did not catch the look the girl gave him. She seemed slow in admiration of men. There was only something speculative in her glance.

They had to ride several miles before they came to the thin road which led up to her home. When they started on that road, Hammond said he knew where the place was. He told her her father would make some money on that place after he got started.

"I hope so," she said simply.

"You like a good time, ma'am," he observed.

"Certainly."

Well, he couldn't blame her for that, but still he felt a little depression as they went along. He wished he were clever.

When they reached the house, they found her mother there, a woman of forty with hair like her daughter's, though not so bright or so abundant. The girl and her mother got lunch after a while, and Hammond sat on the front step and smoked cigarettes. He was feeling kinda queer. He hadn't had a home since he was twelve. Then he had been a chore boy and later a puncher, becoming in the end a top hand. He had worked for a man who had liked him and who had staked him. He was fairly well-to-do in cows now, but he never seemed to have much money. A fella would probably have to have money for a girl who liked a good time.

HE WAITED till the middle of the afternoon and Purviance did not return. He saw that Mrs. Purviance was worried a little. She said Purviance had said he would be back at noon. They were strangers in a strange country. Something might have happened to her husband. Hammond tried to reassure her, but he had a vague feeling of uneasiness himself.

"You got a pair of glasses, ma'am?" he asked the older woman.

"If Purviance didn't take them with him," she answered.

She went into another room and came back with the glasses. Hammond slung the strap over his shoulder.

"I'll just ride up some place an' look around," he said.

He went out to his horse through the front door. When he came around the house, he found the girl in the yard there, having come out the back door.

"I'll go with you," she said.

"Home'd be a good place for you," he told her.

"Do you think something may have happened to my father?" she asked anxiously.

"It's possible," he said, "but not likely."

They went out to the road and down it a way and then struck up into a hill path. They climbed several hundred feet and reached an eminence from which they could view most of the valley and the broken country on the other side of the hill. Hammond stood facing the valley and he swept it with his glasses. He picked up bunches of grazing cattle but nothing out of the ordinary.

Then he turned his back to the valley and scanned the country beyond. For a while there was nothing extraordinary there. Then a horseman rode directly into the focus of the glasses. Hammond saw at once that there was something wrong with him. His horse was walking and he was slumped in the saddle. He wore no coat and he seemed to have a bandage about his arm just below the elbow.

Hammond was aware that the girl was close to him, at his side. He did not want to excite her. He would give the rider a little time to come closer. Undoubtedly he was hurt, but he could not be badly hurt or he would not have been able to keep his seat. He must, too, have been hurt while he was alone, or there would have been some one with him. Probably he had been shot but had managed to continue to ride. So Hammond turned the glasses away from the man, intending to pick him up again in a few minutes.

He discovered, however, that he could not deceive this girl so easily as all that. She must have been watching him closely and must have discovered some change in him.

"What did you see?" she asked.

Hammond had an idea that that wounded rider was her father. Since he was not badly hurt, Hammond saw no harm in telling her. She would want to know immediately. She might flare out at him if he tried to keep the news from her. He handed the glasses to her and told her where to focus them. She brought them around in a half circle and then held them still. He knew she had picked up the rider, but she did not start or exclaim.

"It's my father," she said calmly. "He's been hurt, but, I think, not badly. We'll go down there."

She sprang on her horse and Hammond hopped to his. He was afraid the girl might go tearing down the slope, but she took it steadily. She came around the end of the hill as steadily, but once good going opened up before her, she spurred the horse and dashed off, with Hammond close behind her.

They were in a position presently to see the rider without the aid of the glasses. As Hammond caught sight of him, he stopped his horse and began to unwind the bandage on his arm.

When they came up to him, he was holding the bandage in his right hand and staring curiously at his left arm.

"I swear, Molly," he said, "I thought I was goin' to bleed to death. That bullet seemed to just crease my arm, but she cer'nly drew blood. Struck a gusher, by gosh. I put a bandage around it, but I was afraid to keep it there all the time. Yuh get gangrene or some doggone thing that way, don't you?"

"It might cause trouble," Molly said. "Has it stopped bleeding now?"

"Why, yes, when I unrolled the bandage just now, she didn't bleed no more."

"Wounds act that way sometimes," Hammond observed.

Purviance looked at him as if he had just become aware of his presence. Then he looked at his daughter. Molly introduced them, naming Hammond as a friend of Scott.

"Oh," said Purviance, "glad to meet yuh. Scott is a good ol' fella. Any friend o' his'n is welcome."

"Well, what happened to you, Father?" the girl asked. "Who shot you?"

"Oh, I dunno," Purviance answered evasively.

CHAPTER III

NOT ALONE

HAMMOND saw what Purviance had in his mind. He had been shot, and he was planning to settle with the man who had shot him. Hammond understood that he was a hard-willed old fellow and that he would be difficult to handle. As they sat for a moment in silence, Hammond cast about for an argument which would prevail upon Purviance to turn the matter over to him. Ordinarily Hammond would have respected Purviance's reticence, but Hammond's meeting with the girl had made a difference. He did not deny to himself that he would like to make a hit with her.

Molly saved him the trouble of trying to sway Purviance. She suddenly lifted her head, and Hammond found a new quickness and brightness in her manner.

"There's no use in your saying you don't know, Father," she declared. "I know how you feel. You are going to the house for a gun, and then you are going to trail whoever attacked you. That might be all right ordinarily, but a good many things are going on here just now. Mr. Hammond killed a couple of coyotes this morning. He thinks they were mad. We found one of our calves with a broken leg. Mr. Hammond shot it. We followed sign for a while and then lost it in the creek. Perhaps the man who shot you was the man who made that sign."

"Hoom, we got somethin' on our hands, have we?" Purviance said. "Well, that makes a difference mebbe. I'll tell you how it was: I was just ridin' around to see what I could see. I climbed up on a bench to take a general look. There was a bunch of cows below me. From where I was I couldn't make out the brand. Pretty soon a fella come ridin' through a cut in the hills. He come on these cattle sudden.

"I don't suppose he would have tried to drive any of 'em off. He couldn't do it without runnin' 'em out into the open in a few minutes, whichever way he took, but I expect he is one of these fellas that has to look cows over whenever he comes on 'em. Thieves like him get the habit.

"While I watched him, he circled round them cows. He looked at the brands, and then set the cows on the move, so he could see what shape the two calves was in. The calves trotted right along, and I s'pose they tempted this fella because they was in shape to travel well. If he had been near his hole, he could have got them calves there in no time.

"He stopped pretty soon and took off his hat and wiped his forehead. I would know that fella if I saw him again. He has got a funny head. Before he took off his hat you wouldn't never suspect he was bald. Fact was, his hair was kind of long and ragged. But when he removed his hat, there wasn't a sign of hair except for the fringe that fell below the hat. He was most amazin' bald. Whoever trails that fella an' comes up with him will have a fight on his hands. He is a powerful man. He don't stack up so tall, but his shoulders is a mile wide. He has got long arms. He could wrop 'em around a man."

"What kind of horse?" Hammond asked.

"First, in the sunlight, I thought it was a gray, but when I looked it over I seen it would be a blue roan in ordinary light. Ugly beast, hammerheaded, rangy, bony. One of these horses that don't take on no meat, no matter how much they eat. That horse had been rode a lot. Dust was ground into its coat. I noticed that its legs up to the knees was lighter-colored, showin' it had been in water recent. It'd seem he was the man whose sign you picked up, Hammond. He must have followed the creek for some little time, to wash out that ground-in dust thataway.

"Well, there I was up on that bench without no gun. Time was when I never stirred from my doorstep without a gun, and I bawled myself out for not havin' one now."

"You better wear one from now on," Hammond put in. "These coyotes is gettin' bad."

"Gosh, I ain't come to a time of life when I am afraid of a coyote," Purviance said. "I could wring one's neck."

"Just the same if one took you unexpected and bit you, you'd have to travel far for treatment," Hammond declared.

"Well, mebbe. Anyhow, I was mad at myself for not havin' a gun. When this fella put his hat back on, he sat lookin' at them cows for a pace. Just seemed like he couldn't give 'em up. I hopped down from my horse, and my foot struck a stone. Without thinkin', I picked up the stone. Still without thinkin', I thrun it down at this fella. It didn't miss him by more'n three inches. Say, that man is fast. His gun was in his hand in the time it took that stone to fall to the ground after slippin' past his nose. He looked up, caught sight of fool me, and threw a bullet. It hit my arm, and, like I said, I thought I was goin' to bleed to death. The fella spurred his horse and was gone while I sat there lookin' at my life's blood a-leakin' away."

"Well, here's how it stacks up," Hammond said. "That fella knows he has been recognized. He will begin to plan his getaway. Judging from the way he looked them cows over, he is an avaricious son-of-a-gun. A man like that is never satisfied with what he has. This fella will have two or three busy nights and then he will hole up for a while. After that he will fade out with whatever stock he has gathered. He will have to be nabbed before he fades."

"I still got one arm," Purviance said. "The other ought to be as good as new pretty soon. Ain't so very bad. I'll help you."

Hammond knew Molly was looking at him, and he half turned so that he looked away from her and beyond Purviance. He found it difficult to dissemble before this girl. She seemed to have a way of probing into a man's thoughts.

"You are a stranger in this country, Mr. Purviance," Hammond said. "You have got a couple of women to look after. You had better—"

"No one needs to look after me," said Molly, icily.

Hammond saw that he had made a mistake. He had been so busy trying to frame an argument which should make Purviance remain at home that he had not thought how his statement would sound to the girl.

"Well," he said lamely, "you don't think you and your mother ought to be left alone, do you, Miss Purviance?"

"I—" Miss Purviance began, and then she stopped.

Hammond stole a glance at her. She was looking at the ground. There was a suggestion of a smile at the corner of her lips, but when she spoke her tone was serious enough. Still she did not raise her eyes.

"I see what you mean," she said. "Yes, father better stay at home to look after mother and me."

Glad that she was going to leave him a free hand, Hammond did not perceive that her acquiescence was too ready. It did not occur to him that there was not sufficient reason for her sudden change of front.

"We'll all go home," she said. "Father's arm must be dressed, and you will want to take some food with you."

"That'll be fine," Hammond said.

They returned to the house. In the middle of the afternoon, Hammond was ready to start. He was armed and provided with food. The girl went out with him while he mounted. She looked up at him and there was again that suggestion of a smile at the corners of her mouth. Hammond flushed. Doggone it, he was trying to play a man's part, but she seemed unable to take him seriously. His anger flared up a little.

"Well, good-by, ma'am," he said stiffly. "See you again some time mebbe."

A little chuckle came from her lips. Cold-faced, he looked down at her.

"It's all a joke to you," he said sternly, "but I'm tellin' you it ain't a joke. That baldheaded fella is a gunman. He has proved that. He knows he has been seen, and he won't play with anybody that tries to cross him. Them coyotes is gettin' bolder an' bolder. They are so crazy now that I think *they* think they are reg'lar wolves. Mebbe that baldheaded fella will shoot me or one of them coyotes will bite me, and I will go crazy—crazier than I am now, I mean."

"Well, there are one or two things in your favor," she said.

"What?"

"The baldheaded man probably won't bite you and the coyotes certainly won't shoot you."

HAMMOND spurred his horse away from her. Necessarily his acquaintance with girls had been limited. There were only a few of them scattered through the country, and since Hammond could not dance, he had never been a squire of dames in the villages. He confessed to himself moodily that he didn't understand women. Things would probably turn out as he had feared in the beginning: Every damned puncher for miles around would presently be showing up at the Purviance ranch house. Those clever boys would get the inside track. If Hammond showed up there, he could sit and twiddle his thumbs.

Well, he wouldn't fall down on this job. He would kill every cussed coyote that howled that night, and he would make that baldheaded fella dance to a tune of Hammond's playing.

He did not know, of course, just where he might find the cattle thief, but he could easily guess that the man's hideout was somewhere in the mountains. There were many places in those mountains where a man could successfully hide for days on end. So Hammond headed for them.

He rode steadily and presently he was climbing to the heights. The road wound and turned and twisted and soon he was among thin timber. Shortly he came to a summit. He was now a mile above sea level, and he stopped to look about. The sun was declining and up here it was all very still. Beyond Hammond there was a big canyon, and he knew that would make an ideal hiding place for the baldheaded man. Cattle rarely drifted in there because the formation was rocky and there was little grass. Riders passed through it infrequently, for it led away from the road and came out on a sagebrush flat.

He decided that he would skirt the rim of the canyon and have a look down into it while the light held. He might find something which would give him a start. He dismounted, examined the single cinch, and mounted again. As he gathered up his reins, there was a sound behind him. He turned. Molly Purviance came into view. When she found him looking at her, she stopped her horse and regarded him. She was rather like a naughty child, he thought. Her head was dropped, so that she looked at him with eyes which her upper lids veiled. She seemed to be waiting to discover how he would take her advent.

Hammond's anger, when he had left her, had been rather spurious. He could not have felt any deep anger toward her. Now he felt only concern. She had done a foolish thing in following him. He would have to reason with her and send her back. Gosh, he guessed he would have to take her back. It wasn't safe for her to be roaming the timber with that baldheaded man on the prod. So he rode up to her.

"This isn't any place for you," he said gravely. "You will have to go back home."

"Can't do it," she said.

"Why not?"

"Wouldn't be safe for me to go back alone. Coyotes, baldheaded man."

"You came here alone," he reminded her.

"So did you."

"Well, my good gosh," he exploded, "that's my job. I'm on the prod my own self. At least I'm supposed to be. Come on, Miss Purviance, I'll take you back. You're just hindering me."

Her head snapped up. Her eyes glowed. She thrust out her square little chin.

"Hindering you?" she snapped. "I guess not! I am as good a man as you are, I'll bet you. I can handle a gun. I can ride wherever you can ride. I'm looking for that man myself."

"Now, now," he said, "I know what you are, better'n you think. You can do anything I can do, but you might get hurt."

"So might you."

"I'm orderin' you home."

"I'm not going home. This is no one

man job. You should have gone for help. Are you trying to show off?"

"Are we goin' to quarrel, ma'am?" he asked meekly.

"I hope not. It all depends on you. What are you planning for, say, the next hour?"

"Why, I was goin' to ride along the rim of the canyon over here."

"I'll go with you. I won't get in your way."

He decided he would let her go. Probably there would be no one in the canyon anyway. He would ride along it, go down its slope on the far side, come out amid the sage, and then insist upon her going home.

"Come right along," he said.

Well, girls are funny. She did not immediately start, though she saw him turn his horse, prepared to go on.

"I don't want to get in your way, Mr. Hammond," she said. "I will be very still, and I will hide whenever it is necessary."

He would have her out of this in a minute. He was not averse to a ride with her. The baldheaded man and the mad coyotes could wait till he returned.

"Oh, that's all right," he said.

"I really can help you," she declared. "I stole away from the house and followed you. I thought you might need help. You shouldn't have tackled this job alone."

"Oh, I know I ain't up to much," he said.

She came up alongside him and they started. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. He thought she was not looking at him; he believed her face was turned toward the front; but now he saw that she had rolled an eye toward him as he had toward her. As those oblique glances met, she laughed again.

"Ma'am," he said plaintively, "I wish you wouldn't laugh at me."

"I'm not," she said stoutly, "but really isn't it funny how a nice boy always wants to be a hero."

Hammond locked his lips. Dammit, she wouldn't take him seriously. Nice boy! He wasn't a boy; he was a man. He would show her before he had finished. He didn't want to be a hero. There was a job of work to do, and he had tackled it as a man should.

He did not look at her again. They came presently to the rim of the canyon and turned off on it. Hammond knew that it ran for about a third of a mile. Anyone hiding out in it would come in from one end or the other. He would have to do that, for he could not descend its precipitous sides. It was a genuine canyon, not a ravine which local pride had dignified.

When they had gone a little way, Hammond suggested that they lismount. He said they could go nearer to the rim on foot than on their horses. She obediently slipped down and he followed her. They tied their horses to trees by the twisted ends of their reins. Then Hammond crept out to the rim and knelt. The girl stood back. He had seen that she had grown serious. Maybe she would come to see that this was a man's and not a boy's job after all.

Hammond peered down into the canyon, but he saw nothing unusual. The sides dropped down precipitously till they almost reached the bottom. Then they sloped gently and there was a tangle of small conifers down there. The floor was covered with them also and between them there was a good deal of brush. Hammond had been through the canyon, and he knew that there were indentations all along it, big enough to hide a small bunch of cattle in.

He rose and went back to the girl. He whispered to her that they would go along a way, and then he would peer down again. The going presently became rather difficult. There were stunted trees and brush. They had to wade through the brush and dodge beneath the trees. Once, doing this latter, they came close together and he felt her hand touch his. He did not know whether the touch was intentional or accidental, but the hand's remaining there must have been intentional. He turned his own hand and found hers in it. He clasped hers and she made no effort to draw it away. She suffered it to remain there as unconsciously as if they had been two children on a holiday in the woods. So they went along, hand in hand.

"I'll have a look again," Hammond said.

For the life of him he could not keep his voice steady. He could not remember when he had held a girl's hand before. To hold this girl's hand was a large experience. It left him rather breathless. She seemed to notice nothing. She did not withdraw her hand, and she went up to the rim with him. He released her then and knelt. As he leaned out, she knelt, too, but a little behind him.

For a time Hammond saw nothing. There were only the trees and the brush, and now and then a darting bird. Hammond lay down and thrust himself out over the rim. The girl came a little closer to him. At first he had been unable to see distinctly into the bottom of the canyon, but now, his eyes accustomed to the gloom, he could make out even small objects.

He continued to stare. He felt a kind of fascination. He did not know what to ascribe this to, unless it was some warning which his sixth sense was conveying to him. There was no sign of life in that canyon except for the occasional, darting bird. There was—

He stiffened. Molly must have seen the movement which brought about his sudden rigidity. He felt her draw herself to the rim and look over and down. He threw out an arm so that it should be in front of her. She was in no danger, for the earth was firm beneath them, but he had that instinct to protect her. The arm must slightly have obscured her vision, for she laid her hand on it and pressed it down.

What had startled Hammond had been a slinking figure in the brush. He had known it was a coyote, and he instantly believed it to be an infected one. He thought he could detect something savage n its progress through the brush.

Then the animal's progress suddenly stopped. It was still for a moment, and hen it was gone into the thicker brush and he trees, a flash amid the darker foliage.

Hammond glanced along the canyon. He aw what had startled the coyote. A horseman was threading his slow way along the anyon, keeping well up to the wall across rom Hammond and Molly.

CHAPTER IV

BRUTALITY

THE rider came on till he was below Hammond and the girl. Hammond waited to see if he would pass on, ut he did not. Hammond's fear had been at he was merely on his way through the nyon. In that case Hammond would ve had to mount and ride along the rim an attempt to meet the rider at the canyon's entrance. That would have meant some sound up here and the rider might have heard it. It was important that the presence of watchers be not disclosed: For that rider was mounted on a blue roan.

Hammond was sure he was the man who had shot Purviance, and in that event he was the cattle thief. Why he had come into this secluded place Hammond could not just now make out. So far as Hammond could see his stolen cattle were not here, and Hammond thought he would want to go to where they were, so that he could protect them in case he had been followed. He would want to remove them as soon as possible, Hammond thought. Cattle thieves did not, as a rule, linger, when pursuit was imminent.

The man stopped his horse below the two watchers and dismounted. He stood for a moment looking across the canyon. He seemed to be studying what he saw there, for he turned his head as his eyes covered a space of some fifty feet. Whatever it was he had regarded, he seemed to be satisfied. He tied his horse and took a roll from behind his saddle. Removing a package from this, he unwrapped it and began to eat.

Hammond saw that he was in haste to get through the meal. He had not stopped to prepare coffee, the traveler's usual necessity, and he stuffed his mouth and wolfed the food down.

Hammond decided that the man had stopped merely to eat. That finished, he would be on his way again, and since he had come from one direction, he would undoubtedly head in the opposite direction. Hammond believed he had better get to the head of the canyon, so that he could intercept the man when he rode out. He could negotiate the distance along the rim as quickly as the man could negotiate it in the canyon, and he would have a little start of him while he got ready to depart. He started to draw back from the rim.

Molly seized the arm which lay in front of her and he heard her gasp. He had taken his eyes from the man, but he looked at him again. The man had removed his hat. He had that fringe of hair and that amazing baldness of which Purviance had spoken. His head gleamed whitely in the gathering darkness below.

"It's the man who shot my father,"

Molly whispered. Her voice held a caution.

"I know it," Hammond whispered back. "Draw back and come with me. You must go home while I meet this fella at the head of the canyon. It is goin' to be an easy job. I can hold him up before he knows what is happenin' to him."

He hoped she would not argue about that. This was no place for her. It was one thing to pretend that he could hold up the man without trouble; it was another thing to hold him up. He had proved, by shooting Purviance, that he was ready with his gun, and he might have a confederate hereabouts. Such thieves usually hunted in pairs at least.

"All right," Molly agreed.

Sensible girl! She knew when a climax had arrived, and she wasn't going to make trouble for him by insisting on accompanying him.

"I'll have to hurry," Hammond said. "He will be on his way in a minute."

Molly began immediately to withdraw from the canyon's rim. She moved with the utmost caution, and she was still in a position to see down into the canyon when Hammond stopped her. He had looked along the canyon somewhat idly, and he had seen a slinking form in the brush. The coyote which they had watched before was stealing in the man's direction.

"See it?" Hammond whispered.

She had to look for a moment before her eyes could locate it. Hammond had turned to her, and she nodded. He returned his glance to the animal, and together they watched.

A coyote stealing down on a man in daylight, fading though the daylight now was, was an unusual sight. Though he was convinced that some of the coyotes in the hills and mountains were infected, Hammond could not believe that the baldheaded man was in any danger. He forgot that the coyote's instincts of self-preservation, which roused fear and caution in it ordinarily, were now lost in a red madness. This coyote had reverted to the ferocious type from which it was descended. Where fear would normally have been, hate now held full sway. The animal had the courage of the insane.

Hammond glanced at the man. He had made up his saddle roll again, and now he approached his horse. He had the strings in his fingers, preparatory to tying the roll. Hammond looked back at the coyote. It was not twenty-five feet from the man now, and it was making swift progress, its belly almost touching the ground.

There was an intense silence over everything. The birds had stopped their skimming and their twittering. The sun was rapidly sinking. An anticipatory night hush was in the air. This serenity had apparently lulled the baldheaded man. His horse was ready. He had the twisted end of the reins in his right hand. Now he tucked it under his arm and examined the single cinch just behind the horse's forelegs. His examination seeming to satisfy him, he drew tobacco and papers from his breast pocket and proceeded to roll a lazy cigarette.

Hammond looked back at the coyote. It had stopped and it was almost lost in the brush. Hammond knew that this was the pause which an animal makes just before it attacks an unsuspecting prey. It would endure very briefly.

Hammond was confused as to what he should do. Ordinarily he would not have let any man be attacked as this man was about to be attacked. He believed he could put a bullet into the coyote from here and thus save the man, but he had to reflect on what would happen after that. His shot, for one thing, would disclose his presence. He had Molly with him. The man would hop his horse and flee up the canyon as soon as he heard the shot and saw at what it had been fired. If Hammond missed the coyote, the man could easily despatch it and then flee.

Hammond could not let him get away now. Even if he were not the cattle thief, he was the man who had shot Purviance. Hammond had to take him prisoner on that account. His danger was in being bitten by the coyote. It would not kill him. He would get a probably not very severe wound, as a wound. But the coyote's teeth might send a death-dealing poison into his veins.

In the end the usual code prevailed with Hammond. To trail a man, to capture him, possibly to wound or to kill him if he put up a fight was one thing; to let a crazed animal attack him was another. The baldheaded man, Hammond decided, was entitled to help in his peril.

So Hammond drew his gun. But he was too late. By the time he looked again for e coyote, he could not see it. The bald- aded man had got his cigarette going, d he was smoking it fast. Hammond w that he was going to have several lung- ling puffs and then he was going to cast wn the cigarette and put his foot on it. e would not smoke as he rode, for the garette would leave a slight odor in this ll air.

The man did just what Hammond ex- cted. He took one last deep pull at e cigarette, dropped it on the ground, and t his heel on it. Then he slowly breathed t the smoke. His hand was lifted to laid on the horn.

Then the coyote shot out from the trees the man's back. Hammond could only e the fast-moving body. He could not ake out the mouth, but he had a no- n that it was wide open and dripping. e could not hear the sound the animal ade, but he supposed there was some arling sound of satisfaction.

The man heard a sound, for he sud- nly wheeled about, but he was too late. e coyote's teeth closed on his leg. It emed no more than a nip, for the man ook the leg free, stepped back and aimed kick with his other foot at the animal's ad. The kick fell short, for the man emed to have been cautious in it. He s not carried off his balance by the t's striking nothing. Instead he with- ew the foot and his gun came out. There s an explosion, a spurt of flame in the reasing gloom down there. The coyote pped.

Hammond saw that the baldheaded man d a rude sort of poise. He was not ken by his experience. Hurt a little ugh he was, he took things in their ler. First he advanced to the coyote d bent to it. His examination seemed reveal to him that the animal was not lly hurt. He immediately straightened and began looking about him. His rch ended when he picked up a stout k, the fallen branch of a tree. Re- ning to the coyote, he stood over it.

'He just creased it," Hammond whis- ed to Molly. "He is waiting for it to e to."

She nodded. She was still staring athlessly down into the canyon. Ham- nd saw the man lift the club. The dows were quite thick about the man his horse now, and Hammond could not make out the coyote. Undoubtedly it had stirred, and the man was waiting till it revived a little more. In a moment he raised the club higher and brought it smartly down. It was not a heavy blow, not such a blow as this powerful man would deliver if he were trying to kill the coyote.

Hammond supposed the blow had stunned the coyote anew, for the man let the stick fall till its end rested on the ground. His motionlessness endured for two or three minutes. Then the stick came up, came down again.

"The brute!" Molly breathed. "Why doesn't he kill it? He lets it come to a little and then he strikes it. He is torturing it."

"I imagine that's what he would do to anything or anyone that opposed him," Hammond said.

Molly, he knew, turned to look at him. He made his face serene, as if no thought of impending danger to himself was disturbing him. He knew what the girl was thinking. She was thinking that soon he would be dealing with this man at close quarters. If the man got the best of him, torture would follow capture. That was undoubtedly the baldheaded man's way.

"I'M GOING for help," Molly said. Hammond had been casting about in his mind for some pretext which would start her for her home. It simply had not occurred to him that he suggest that she go for help. He would not have made the suggestion, if the notion had come to him, for he would not want her to think that, man to man, he was afraid of Baldy. But if she went for help, she would be out of harm's way. If this man had an associate, that associate would not be out in the open through which she would ride. By the time she returned with her father and anyone else she could pick up, he would have disposed of Baldy or Baldy would have disposed of him. He would descend to the encounter as soon as the man had killed the coyote and set out on the way he was going.

"It'd be a good idea," he agreed. "That fella is a brute, as you say. I will need help to bag him."

She withdrew swiftly, noiselessly from the rim, and he followed her. He expected her to be agreeable now that he had been agreeable with her, but she faced him, close to him, her eyes flashing.

"You think you're smart, don't you?" she whispered. "You just want to get me out of the way. You know that as soon as I'm gone, you will go down there. Why can't you play square, for once in your life?"

Phew! She was certainly a spitfire, and she had read his mind as if it were a printed page.

"I just wanted to get you away from the danger," he said. "Course I can't waste any time. I've got to get right after that fella."

"I'm not leaving you," she stated.

"Molly," he said slowly, "you are a fine, fearless girl. You are as good as any man I know, but just suppose anything should happen to you. Leavin' everything else out of it, what would people say about me? They would say I let a girl remain in danger when I should have sent her home. There'll be no excuse for me. Come on, Molly: Gimme a free hand. Lemme do the best I can."

"You've got to go down into the canyon or to the head of it," she argued. "I promise not to follow you there. I'll stay up here. If you don't return in a given time, I will go for help."

"You won't go home at once?"

"I won't!"

"Will you promise to wait no longer than thirty minutes?"

"I promise."

"All right. That's the best I can do. Stay here, please."

She remained where she was and he returned to the rim. He looked down for not more than five seconds. Then he pushed himself back and got quickly to his feet.

"He has killed the coyote," he reported. "He is gettin' on his horse. He will walk the horse through the canyon. I can be at the head of it before he is. Take care of yourself, Molly."

"I will," she said. "And you—remember what that man is. Remember what it will mean if you fall into his hands."

"Oh, I'll hold him up before he knows it," he prophesied.

He drew himself up on his horse slowly, so that the animal would not jump, and then he set off by the way by which he had come. He looked back presently and saw that Molly had mounted. She had heade
her horse in his direction and she was look
ing after him. He went on at a smar
walk.

When he came to where the canyo
ended below him, he found that he ha
not calculated on the time it would tak
him to descend. He had figured that h
had more time than Baldy, but now he per
ceived that he had less. If the man ha
kept his horse to a pace equal to that o
Hammond's horse, he must now be neari
the mouth of the canyon, and Hammo
was above him.

There was only one thing for it, Ha
mond saw: He must descend. Luckily h
knew every foot of the winding way, a
he set his horse down it. The animal w
sure-footed and it made good time. Ha
mond was within a hundred feet of t
head of the canyon shortly. He stopp
his horse and listened intently. Th
was no sound.

He had stopped the horse in the gray
the twilight and as he sat him there t
was at once definitely the darkness
night. Hammond had only his hearing
depend upon, and he used that to the
most. He listened for the fall of a hors
hoof, the snap of a branch, the creak
saddle leather. There was no such soun
A surge of disappointment went throu
Hammond. Doggone it, he had handl
this situation like an amateur. If he h
known his job, he would have come b
while Baldy was beating the coyote
death. He feared he had let the man s
through his fingers.

He pictured the man as he had se
him beside his horse in the last look do
into the canyon. He had reported to Mo
that the man was mounting. He saw n
that that had not been exact. He had co
to his decision about that in too much o
hurry. He remembered now that Ba
had only been advancing toward his hor
Hammond had merely thought he was
ing to mount. Baldy's head had been be
Hammond had believed he had been thi
ing. Now Hammond saw that he had be
looking down at his leg. Undoubtedly
had stopped to see how bad the bite h
been, if indeed the coyote had sunk
teeth into the flesh. No man of Bald
experience would let a wound go with
at least looking at it.

Perhaps the wound had been worse t

Baldy had thought it. In that case he would dress it. He probably did not know about the rabies among the coyotes, and he would think the wound needed only ordinary care. In any event he would take o chance on getting even a mild infection when at any moment he might be the object f a manhunt.

That diagnosis relieved Hammond. He was at once sure that Baldy was still in the anyon. He would be coming out presntly and then Hammond would nab him. Why, the task ought to be as easy as he ad described it to Molly.

He dismounted, tied his horse, and went p to the canyon's mouth. There was no ound in there. He drew a gun and sat own at the entrance to the canyon. In is stillness he listened for Baldy's approach. Baldy had ridden into the canyon oldly; he would probably ride boldly out f it.

Hammond thought then of Baldy's situaon. Hammond had no idea of how fast e poison of rabies worked. Baldy might e in danger of his life before the night as over. The infection might not show self for several days. For all Hammond new Baldy might be a raving madman efore dawn, but that was Baldy's bad k. He was a thief and at least a pontial killer. Whatever fate overtook him, would doubtless deserve it. The posbility of Baldy's dying a terrible death iled to stir Hammond's sympathy. Baldy as playing his own game. He would have abide by the result. Hammond's amition now was to take him prisoner and ive him over to Purviance's.

What he judged to be fifteen minutes ssed and then fifteen minutes more. The rkness was thick down here now. Hamnd could see no more than the blur of e trees and the canyon's farther wall. t he could hear and he listened intently. ll there was no sound.

For a moment he turned his head so t an ear was lifted to the rim. There s no sound up there either. Well, he uldn't be able to hear Molly when she k her departure. She would go as ndlessly as possible. Once out of earot she would ride like the wind. That uld carry her to safety. Before she rened, Baldy would have come out. Any she would be in no danger. She would ve aid.

But another fifteen minutes passed and still there was no sound of an approaching horse. One of two things was certain: Either the man had come out of the canyon before Hammond's arrival or else he was still in there. If he was still in there, he was probably going to remain there for the night.

Hammond waited only a few minutes longer. Then he rose. If Baldy wouldn't come to him, he would go to Baldy. With his gun in his hand, he began to make his slow and careful way up the canyon.

CHAPTER V

A TUMBLE

HE HAD to make his way slowly and carefully because he did not know now where Baldy was. The man might have come forward; he might have retreated; he might be where he had been. At thought of that last Hammond stopped. He figured the distance he had come, and he believed he was halfway to where he had last seen Baldy. Therefore the man had not come this far. That, Hammond thought, argued that he had remained where he had been. If he had done that, it seemed likely that he purposed spending the night there. If he were going to spend the night there, he might be lying down even now. He had had a rather trying day; he had shot a man; he had been bitten by a coyote; rest would be welcome to him.

That clarified the situation for Hammond, and he stepped forward with more certainty though with no less caution. After a time he believed that he must be very near the spot at which he had last seen his man. The darkness was intense here. Even though Hammond's eyes should have become accustomed to the gloom, he could make out nothing. There was not even the suggested shape of a tree or a bush. The walls of the canyon were one with the solidity of the darkness. He believed, however, that he was nearer the left hand wall than the right hand one, and he turned a little and groped his way forward. Presently his hand came into contact with the wall. Beneath his feet there was a slight slope, but he pressed forward on it, his hand gliding along the wall. If he encountered Baldy, he wanted to know precisely where he was.

His forward progress was now slow. He could not see his feet. Indeed so far as sight went, his body might have been detached from them and have been floating forward without support. But he was acutely aware that if he were betrayed it would be by his footfalls. So far he had kept those noiseless, but he might at any moment step on a dry twig. Baldy, he supposed, from the nature of the life he lived, the perils that almost always confronted him, was a light sleeper. Even so slight a noise as that made by a snapping twig would rouse him, and he was not one to put his gun away from him while he slept. It would be at his hand, and if he were awakened he would come soundlessly to a sitting posture with the gun in his hand. As Hammond neared him, there would probably be some sort of betrayal, if it were no more than Baldy's sudden realization that he was not alone in the canyon.

Luck, however, seemed in Hammond's favor. He took up each foot in its turn and put it down as gently as if he were walking on egg shells. He failed to put his weight on either foot till he had pressed it firmly on the ground. So he went forward as if he had been a shadow amid the shadows.

The critical moment came suddenly as such moments are likely to do. He had put his left foot down and had raised the right and thrust it forward. He had been gaining time by making this a quick thrust, because rapidity in this could make no sound. Thus he gained a little of the time he lost in pressing the foot to the ground when he let it down. This forward-thrust foot came into contact with something which yielded a little. Hammond instantly knew that it was the body of a man. The toe of Hammond's boot had caught the man in the side. Flashingly Hammond could vision Baldy as lying there, wrapped in a blanket, his hands probably clasped beneath a cheek and resting on the saddle under his head.

Hammond was also sure immediately of one of two things: Either Baldy *was* a light sleeper or else he had not been asleep at all. The body was quickly drawn away from Hammond's foot and Hammond heard a slight stir beneath him. Baldy had with-
drawn his body and in the same instant h
had doubtless come to his knees. There
fore Hammond could not be sure of his po
sition. If Hammond tried to cast himsel
down on the man, he might find himsel
lying on the ground with the advantag
turned over to Baldy. Holding his breath
he waited for some slight sound to guid
him. The sound came, a mere whispe
but Hammond had no time to act. H
suddenly felt his knees encircled by a pai
of powerful arms. Those arms, he knew
were Baldy's. Baldy had thrust out in a
attempt to effect this embrace, and no
luck had been with him.

Instinctively Hammond raised his gun i
an intention to bring the barrel of it dow
on Baldy's head. If luck turned to hi
and he struck Baldy a fair blow, he wou
lay him out. The blow never fell. Bald
pulled suddenly and Hammond lost his b
ance. He had thought he had intended
grip his gun the more tightly to deliver h
blow, but now he realized that there h
been an infinitesimal fraction of a seco
during which his hold on the gun had act
ally been loosed. That had been a me
reflex. The loosening had been prepa
tory to the tightening. The tighteni
failed, because Baldy pulled before t
muscles of Hammond's hand acted. T
gun dropped from Hammond's hand.

In the instant in which he realized th
he was disarmed, he felt himself going ov
backwards. He twisted his body a lit
and threw out his hands, so that his he
would not strike the ground. He ca
down on one forearm, and as he stru
he drew his body together and pulled h
with his legs. One leg came from Bald
clutch. Hammond drew it up and shot
out. Its impact was solid, and Hammo
knew that he had delivered the first bl
of the fight which could not now
avoided. From the solidity of the obj
with which the foot had come into cont
Hammond believed that that object h
been the top of Baldy's head. There m
have been a substantial bone struct
there, for the blow did not stop Bal
There was again an infinitesimal fract
of time during which the man's hold
Hammond's leg was loosed. The time
so brief, however, that Hammond co
not take advantage of it. And then Ba
hurled himself along Hammond's bo
Baldy proved himself an efficient an

less fighter. One forearm went be-
th Hammond's chin. That forearm
apparently heavily muscled. It
ist Hammond's chin up and the head
k. Then Baldy clawed at Hammond's
. Hammond knew that he was seek-
his eyes with his thick fingers with
ir sharp nails. The fingers missed the
s, but they clawed down over Ham-
nd's face from the bridge of his nose.
it roused fury in Hammond. This fel-
had no decency. He would blind a
n, maim him in any other way, to win
battle.

Iammond therefore put all his strength
an upward heave as Baldy's claws
his face. Baldy's body was pushed
but he clutched the clothing over Ham-
nd's ribs to keep from being thrown to
side. Hammond's arms were luckily
side that clutch and were free for ac-
n. He raised his doubled right hand
sent it curving in the general direc-
of Baldy's face. It landed on the side
Baldy's head, and the head was so hard
t Hammond had numbness all through
hand. However, his left hand had fol-
ed his right in its upward flight, and
t hand now seized Baldy's cheek. The
k was in direct contrast to the upper
t of the head. It proved to be sur-
ingly flabby. Hammond's fingers
efore gathered up a fold of flesh. He
k his nails deeply. When Baldy quickly
v his head to one side, Hammond lost
hold but he had the satisfaction of
wing that he had drawn blood, rather
ously. He could feel it, wet and
oth, on his fingers. Fury possessed
dy then.

HAMMOND'S belief that he would
sleep with a gun near him was well
founded. Baldy freed a hand and
n to grope. Hammond aimed another
at his face. This blow landed on the
of his jaw, and he heard Baldy grunt.
truck again. Now he missed and his
slipped past Baldy's head. That
ght his arm over Baldy's head and
ightened it in a crushing grip. His
came under Baldy's throat and he
to fasten the fingers into that throat.
could, he would tear the man's wind-
out.

ldy seemed to realize the danger of
He was still groping for the gun. In
spite of his peril he would not stop that, but he turned his head away from Hammond's seeking fingers and pressed his cheek down hard. Beneath his hand Hammond could feel the cords in the man's neck tighten and stiffen.

Then Baldy stopped groping. His hand came up. Hammond felt a gun pressed into his ribs. Baldy had recovered his gun and he now had it in position to blow Hammond's heart out. Hammond stopped struggling and lay perfectly still. He waited for the sound of the explosion. It did not come. Dimly he wondered why Baldy did not pull the trigger. Baldy had his reason. He proved himself no man's fool. Even while he had struggled, he had been thinking, or else his instinct of self-preservation had stood him well in place of actual thought.

"How many with yuh, fella?" he whispered.

Sped up by necessity, Hammond's own thinking was as swift as the lightning's flash. He had gained a few precious seconds because Baldy had feared he was not alone. He must gain a few more. He must make time, so that he might have another chance at Baldy.

"On'y two," he answered.

Like all crooks Baldy was of a suspicious nature. The simplest of statements was to be carefully weighed and usually to be found wanting. Baldy's weighing of Hammond's simple statement took but a second. Then he pressed the gun more firmly into Hammond's side.

"The truth, fella," he said.

"Well, there are six," Hammond answered.

"More like it," said Baldy. "No three of yuh would come after me."

"I came alone," Hammond reminded him, more to gain further time than anything else.

"Aw, yuh was prowlin'. Yuh didn't know I was in here."

"I saw you from the rim."

"Liar! If yuh had knowed I was in here, yuh would have waited for more help. Well, where is them five others?"

"Six others, I said. Two on the rim an' two guardin' each end of the canyon."

"That does make six. Damn yuhr hide, how many you need to capture one man?"

"Six an' a coyote," Hammond said.

"Oh, yuh saw that coyote bite me, did yuh? Well, I reckon yuh was up on the rim. Yuh got nerve, ain't yuh? Well, yuh will need it. I will use yuh to make my getaway. Lay still."

Keeping the gun pressed into Hammond's side, he felt over Hammond's clothing for a gun. He discovered only the empty holster.

"What became of yuhr gun?" he demanded.

"Flew out of my hand when you grabbed me."

"Uh, huh. Yuh come in here with a gun in yuhr hand. Yuh was goin' to blow me apart without givin' me no warnin'."

"I was goin' to capture you," Hammond declared. "You are wanted for cattle stealin' and for shootin' Purviance."

"Cattle stealin', hell. Yuh ain't got nothin' on me. And as for shootin' that fella I creased him when he attacked me. Like to know if I didn't have a right to do that."

"You have rights, as you will find out."

Baldy was apparently easily lashed to fury. He pressed the gun still more firmly into Hammond's ribs, and his voice was husky when he spoke again.

"Fella, I ain't goin' to monkey with yuh. Mebbe I am caught. If I am, you are, too. Either both of us goes out of this canyon, me free as the wind, or both of us dies in here. Yuh think I ain't never considered I might be caught like this. Hell, yuh must think I am a fool altogether. I have made up my mind that if I pass out, somebody will go with me. I ain't goin' to make that journey alone. This trip you will be my comp'ny. Now is it the truth that there are two men on the rim and two at each end of the canyon?"

Hammond knew that he must answer quickly. Hesitation would indicate to Baldy that he was making up his story. If he confessed that he was alone for the time being, Baldy would kill him and slip away. The only thing he could think of was to stick to his story.

"It's the truth," he answered.

"I am goin' to slip to one side," Baldy said. "You will still be able to feel the gun. When you are free of my weight, roll over on your stummick real slow. Take it easy now, so't you will feel the gun draggin' over your body. Now!"

He slipped to one side and Hammo knew that he was on his knees. The g was still in Hammond's ribs. He turn slowly and the gun dragged over his bod When he was lying prone, Baldy got to feet, stooping to keep the gun where it w Then he dragged the gun up over Ha mond's side till it was in the small of back.

"Git to yuhr feet as slow as yuh turn over," Baldy ordered.

He came to his own feet as Hammo rose.

"Now," said Baldy, "think of some w to get me out of here."

It was a large order. Of course he co precede Baldy to either end of the cany pretend to tell whoever was there to wi draw, and then escort Baldy out into safe But that would leave him at the m mercy. Either Baldy would shoot him, if he feared explosion and flash, he wo cave in his head with the barrel of gun. That would mean injury or possi death to Hammond and it would pe Baldy to get away. Neither of those sults was especially inviting.

"Hurry up," Baldy directed, as H mond stood there helplessly.

"I'm thinkin'," Hammond snapped. can't figger this thing out in no time."

"Better do some straight thinki Baldy said. "I would just as soon kill as not. I tried to kill that ol' fella to- but I was in too much of a hurry."

"Shut up, then," Hammond flashed. can't think when you are talkin'."

BALDY subsided. He appeared believe that Hammond now only eager to effect his own esc Hammond returned to his problem. got no inspiration, but he had a reco tion which sent a chill through him. M had gone for help. From what he kne her she would return with the men summoned or she would follow t closely. She would want to be in at finish. The party might come up stealt at any time. They might encounter and Baldy as they were leaving the can Baldy, finding himself menaced, would doubtedly try to shoot his way out. M might stop one of his bullets.

His only thought now was of the What could he do to insure her safety? might defy Baldy and let Baldy knock down or shoot him, but on second thought he was sure Baldy would not do that. Hammond was precious to him as a captive. As a dead man, he would be of no value.

The chill which had come to Hammond at thought of Molly was superseded by a fever. He felt sweat break out on his body and trickle down it. Then fury lashed at him. He would take a chance with Baldy. He believed he could do no less. He would whirl and try to engage the man. Undoubtedly Baldy would put a bullet into him, but the explosion would make a sound that would carry far on the still night air. If Molly and her party were nearing the canyon, they would hear that sound and be warned. With Hammond mortally wounded or dead, Baldy would at once flee. He would cease to be a menace to Molly.

It was a bitter dose for a young man, especially a young man who had just met a girl like Molly. It bred grimness in Hammond. He did not of course want to die. He wanted to live. He wanted to meet Molly again. He wanted to capture this detestable brute, for another thing. Well, he would not meet Molly. He would not capture this brute. A bullet was going to tear into him in about a second now.

He tensed himself for his turning.

And then the sharp cry of a coyote sounded in the night. Coyote! Possibly a mad coyote. A swift association of ideas made Hammond think of the animal which Baldy had clubbed to death. Why, that coyote, to attack Baldy as it had done, *must* have been mad. It *must* have carried the germs of rabies in its jaws. It must have communicated those germs, with their terrible infection, to Baldy.

This man was already standing in the shadow of a terrible death. How soon that death would strike at him Hammond did not know. But Hammond thought that quick medical attention was necessary after infection.

"Baldy," he said, "listen to me close."

In his own ears there was a lilting quality in his voice. That was caused by the fact that he had evaded death, as he believed, by a matter of seconds. He was suddenly joyously alive, whereas he might now be lying on the ground, bleeding to death or already dead.

Baldy seemed to have caught that note in his voice and to have found it significant. There was immediately a little uncertainty in the pressure of the gun as if a start had run through the man. At once the pressure was increased, but Hammond knew that he had impressed his captor.

"What is it?" Baldy demanded. "Make it fast an' to the p'int. I ain't got no time to waste."

The man's ordinary voice was full and slightly husky. Now his tone was light and dry. Fear had brought his voice up in his throat. Hammond was sure.

"That coyote bit you, didn't he?" Hammond asked.

"Why, he bit me, but what is a little bite? Hell, I been hurt wors'n that."

"You've heard of rabies, haven't you?" Hammond asked.

"Hyderphoby? I've heard of mad dawgs. That coyote wasn't no dawg."

"A coyote's a kind of dog," Hammond stated. "Anyhow, get this: That coyote was mad."

"Aw—"

Baldy stopped on that. Hammond was sure he was standing behind him with dilated eyes. Hammond had spoken with as much sincerity as he was capable of. That must have impressed Baldy, but something else, as he now revealed, had impressed him more. That was recollection.

"The damn' thing looked funny, acted funny . . . eyes . . . mouth. . . . 'Tacked me in the light. Never knowed a coyote to do that. Fella, this here hyderphoby—what's it like?"

"I don't know exactly," Hammond answered. "But a man must go mad. He—he howls like a dawg. He—he runs away an' hides himself, refusin' water and food. His jaws lock. He can't get 'em open after a while. He—"

Hammond was drawing on his imagination. He didn't know whether he was describing rabies or lockjaw or a combination of both. He wanted to make his description effective, however. It seemed to be effective with Baldy. His voice quivered when he put his next question:

"Kin a man git it from a bite?"

"A man was bitten here the other day," Hammond lied. "They hustled him away to take the Pasteur treatment."

"Pasteur treatment? What's that?"

"Dunno. I've heard they shoot somethin' into your arm or leg to counteract the work of them germs."

"Mebbe I'm full of germs now," Baldy squeaked.

"No doubt of it."

"God, fella, if you're lyin' to me," Baldy suddenly cried, "I'll—I'll—"

"I'll tell yuh the truth," Hammond stated. "There is no one on the rim or at either end of the canyon. Help is on the way, but it won't get here for some time, I'm sure. They will ride like the wind, but the person that went for help had some distance to go."

"Is that the truth?" Baldy demanded.

"It is."

"I will blow," said Baldy.

"You can't," Hammond told him. "The alarm for you has been spread by now. Sheriffs all over are lookin' for you. You are liable to get a bullet into you and be questioned afterwards. Anyhow you wouldn't find a doctor that had that dope. A doctor at Baker or Pendleton might have it. Probably you will have to go to Portland. Doctors don't keep that stuff on hand. You deliver yourself into my hands and I will get you through to the nearest doctor that has that dope. Otherwise you will wander and go mad. They say it is a terrible death a man with rabies dies."

Horror now seemed to be the freight of Baldy's single-track mind.

"Gawd," he whispered. And then after a silence: "You will sure try to git me to a doctor?"

"I sure will—and then I will hand you over to the nearest sheriff. The charges against you will be cattle stealin'. Purviance will pass on your shootin' him. You can face the stealin' charge or die, fella."

"Where's yuhr horse?" Baldy demanded.

"At the head of the canyon."

"I'll get mine and we'll start," Baldy said. "Your word is good, fella?"

"As gold."

Baldy withdrew the gun from the small of Hammond's back.

CHAPTER VI

THERE—AND BACK

SOME forty minutes later Hammond, with Baldy riding beside him, met Molly, her father, Scott, and another man on their way to his assistance.

"Got him, did you?" Purviance asked, as they met in the road and stopped up short.

"Yep. The cattle thief and the man that shot you, all in one," Hammond said.

"Well, Son," said old Scott, "you sure did a good piece of work. Tell us about it."

"I been bitten by a mad coyote," Baldy whined. "We ain't got no time to chew the rag here."

"Where is the coyote now?" Scott asked.

"I beat him to death up in the canyon."

"If the coyote is dead, why hurry?" Scott mildly asked. "Nothin' more can happen to him, if he did bite *you*."

"A-a-r-r-g-h," Baldy snarled.

"Good thing for the coyote that you didn't get in the first bite," Scott grinned. "Son, how did you nab this yere demon?"

Hammond was silent. He thought he had no story of heroism to tell. He'd shine in Molly's eyes if he could say that he had worked his way into the canyon and nabbed Baldy, but how was he going to confess that Baldy had got him foul in a fight?

"Oh, the story will keep," he said. "We better be gettin' on. I promised to get medical attention for this man and then turn him over to the sheriff."

"You'll have to have something to eat before you start," Molly put in. "We'll go right back to the house. Do you know where there is a doctor that has the necessary serum?"

"I don't," Hammond answered. "We will have to work our way through the towns till we come to one where there is the right doctor."

"Do you know anything about this what-d'ye-call-it, ma'am?" Baldy asked.

"Not much," she replied. "You better not lose too much time, though."

"Ride," said Purviance.

They rode till they came to the Purviance ranch house. Molly hastily prepared food. When the two men had eaten it, Scott insisted on being told how Baldy had been captured.

Hammond told the story.

"You done a good job to go into that canyon in the dark lookin' for this fella," Scott said.

Hammond didn't take much comfort from that. The recollection that Baldy had got the best of him rankled. He did not look at Molly. He felt she could scarcely regard him as a hero. He was at least not the conquering hero he had hoped to be.

Perhaps his humility stirred his intelligence. He recalled that he had not yet got the goods on Baldy.

"By the way, ol'-timer," he said, "where are the cattle you stole?"

Baldy proved himself shrewd. He leered at Hammond.

"I got your promise that you will get me to a doctor," he stated. "You will then turn me over to the nearest sheriff on a charge of cattle stealin' only. That's what you said. You will have to prove your charge."

"You shot me," Purviance declared. "I can swear to that. I had a good look at you."

"This fella will break his word then, will he?" Baldy demanded.

"I did promise him you wouldn't press the shootin' charge," Hammond explained. "I thought the cattle stealin' charge would be enough. I've balled things up some."

He stood looking at the floor. He must find a way out of this. It came to him in a flash. He looked up and his eyes encountered Molly's. She was looking directly at him, and she was smiling. It was a warm smile. Curiously he seemed to have grown in her estimation in spite of the fact that Baldy had overcome him.

He turned to that precious person.

"We'll start," he said, "but I have an idea that we will have a heck of a time finding the right doctor."

"You double crosser," Baldy screamed. "You promised to get me to a doctor."

"I will," said Hammond calmly. "Some time. I don't know how long it will take. I don't know how much time we have."

"Them cattle is up in that canyon," Baldy said bitterly. "I took 'em there night before last. I was goin' to get 'em out to-morrow. There is a break in the canyon wall just opposite to where I killed that coyote. I holed them cattle up. *Now* can we start?"

"You betcha," Hammond said. "Come on."

"Me and Scott will get them cattle in the mornin'," Purviance promised.

"Come along, Baldy," Hammond ordered. "We have got a through ticket now. We will keep goin'."

" 'Bout time," Baldy snarled.

He started for the door. Hammond let him go. He knew he would not run away. Scott looked at Purviance and grinned. Hammond gave Scott credit for being keen. He knew Hammond wanted a last word with Molly. Still he need not have grinned like that as he went outside.

"I fought Baldy as hard as I could, but he got the best of me," Hammond said.

Molly looked at him with wide eyes, and he knew that that aspect of the situation had not presented itself to her.

"Why, a man can only fight," she said. "You did better than that. You matched your wits against Baldy's and you won. You won again just now when you made him tell where the cattle were."

She was standing at the side of the room, and now she leaned against the wall. She looked at him sidewise, without turning her head.

"It was a brave thing to go into that canyon where that desperate man was hidden," Molly declared. "You knew he would shoot, but you didn't hesitate. I was terribly afraid all the way here—afraid for you."

She came away from the wall suddenly and faced him fully.

"Well, what's botherin' me," said Hammond, "is, am I goin' to see you when I come back? I ain't very clever. I don't dance; I don't sing. I've always had a lot of work to do."

"You said you and Baldy had a through ticket," she reminded him.

His confusion passed. He lifted his own head and looked straight at her.

"I got a ticket there an' back," he said.

"I'll be here when you return," she told him. "You needn't hurry, either. Baldy won't develop symptoms till three weeks have passed. He may have none for several months."

"Glad you didn't tell him that," Hammond said.

"You and me—we are bright," she smiled.

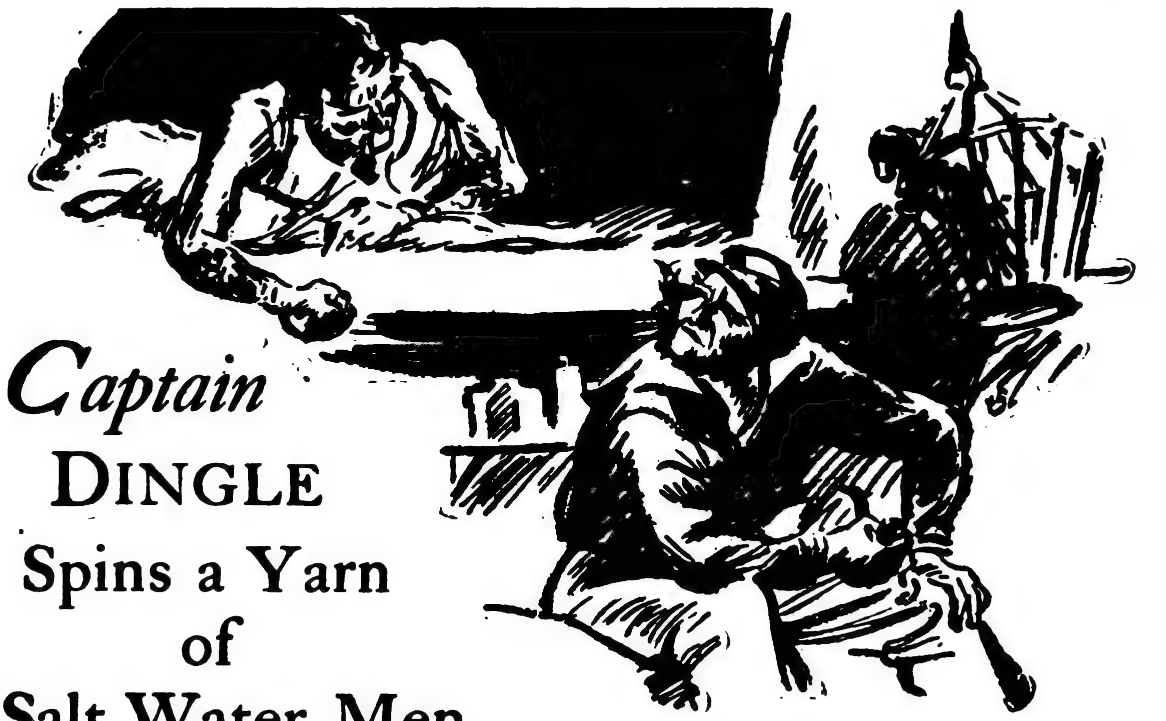
They laughed together.

Presently Hammond and Baldy were riding. When they had gone a little way, Hammond turned in his saddle. Molly was standing in the doorway.

"We gotta hurry, Baldy," Hammond said. "I have no time to waste."

"*You* have no time to waste? *I* have no time to waste."

"Have it your own way," said Hammond, and grinned in the dark.



Captain
DINGLE
Spins a Yarn
of
Salt Water Men

OLD SAILS

OLD SAILS and Old Chips first met in the doorway of the private bar of a snug pub on Circular Quay, three minutes after opening time. They hadn't met before. Their acquaintance was destined to ripen.

Sails strode into the bar heartily enough. His lockers were empty, but his clothes were decent, and the superior young lady behind the bar favored his sturdy, four-square figure with a nod.

"Mornin' m' dear," Old Sails bellowed in a true foghorn voice. "I allus starts the day with a big 'ooker o' rum an' milk." The girl served him readily enough. It was a common order. He mixed his drink, and fumbled in his pockets, taking out a flat box and laying it on the bar while he fumbled further. Then, as if the thought just struck him, he remarked casually:

"S'pose you're not interested in botany, m'dear?" He took the flat box, touching the fastener tentatively.

"Oh yes," she replied quickly, with more curiosity than truth. "I love to study flowers, and—er, flowers, you know. Have you studied it, sir?"

"I live by it," Old Sails lied unblushingly. "I have here—" he opened the box a trifle; the girl's eyes were wonderingly wide. "I have here, three black beetles, and a caterpillar, and— Why, bless my soul! Th' gal's fainted!" With a mild stare of innocent astonishment he drank up his rum and milk, stuck the box of queer botanical specimens into his otherwise empty pocket, and left without going through the usual formality of paying, impossible in his case.

At the door he collided with Old Chips entering, passed on with a sailorly "damn your eyes!" and soon doubled out of sight over the gangway of the fourmaster barque, *Loch Broom,* lying at the wharf with the Blue Peter flying.

The next time he met Old Chips they were both on the forecastle-head of the outward bound fourmaster, listening to the jewels of speech flowing from the lips of a sour but sailorly chief mate directed at a whole watch of misnamed able seamen who had permitted a wire to take charge of them, fly off the winch, and hurl them like skittles broadcast.

Thus early—the tug was only just turning for the Heads—it was obvious to skipper and mates alike that the *Loch Broom* was doomed to sail home with two sailormen on deck, and two only; two old men who apparently ought to have been in a Sailors' Home years ago; two old mossgrown shellbacks who, out of pure professional jealousy, glared unspeakable things at each other: but hardbitten old salts from gnarled fingers to prehensile toes. As for the rest of the crew; well, a ship must have men, even if they be the sweepings of Hell, Hull, and Newgate. These were that sort, and poorer sweepings never outran a besom.

His work about the windlass done, Chips took up the other sailing-day burden of a ship's carpenter, driving home the wedges of the hatch battens. Old Sails, helping the boatswain teach unsailorly swabs how to set topsails, paused for a breath at the main-hatch and regarded Chips curiously. As the sailmaker and the carpenter were berthed together in the *Loch Broom*, these two old mossbacks must sooner or later grow intimate or live the sort of bitter life only possible when two big men are cooped together for four months or so in a box six by nine feet, certified to accommodate two seamen, which in addition to two sea chests must find stowage for the carpenter's tool chest.

Sails slowly produced the identical Botanico-Entomological box that had gotten him a free eye-opener that morning. From it he took a plug of tobacco, bit off a quarter section, and rolled it luxuriously into the pouch of his cheek. Chips began to snort under the critical scrutiny of the other, and soon glared up with the curt remark:

"Fust v'yage, ain't it?"

Sails glared back, forgetting to masticate his cud in his indignation.

"Y' look's if y' never see a ship afore," pursued Chips, welting away at a wedge, then letting fall his top-maul on the deck within two inches of Old Sails' toes.

"Sa-ay, old pensioner," Sails retorted, "in my last ship—"

"I ain't no pensioner!" squealed Chips, straightening up and quivering with excitement. "I can do my work. Your last ship! What wuz she, stone frigate?"

Sails, like a true old shellback, walked away grinning as soon as he had got his man ramping mad, and as he hooked on a tackle to the foretopsail-sheet he shook with sheer old-boyish happiness to hear the profane torrent he had tapped from Old Chips.

IN PERFECT weather, the ship gave her crew time to settle down, and her disgusted officers time to get over their grouches. Old Sails, and Chips, by unwilling diplomacy, contrived to adjust their belongings in the tiny cabin without friction, and Sails was seated on the fore hatch in the second dogwatch chewing contentedly upon his quid and sewing at a canvas Cunarder. Sails had signed on properly, as had Chips and the others; but Sails had obviously had no luck ashore, for he joined with an empty chest and was already in debt for slops. To cut down indebtedness as far as possible, with a view to payday, he had rummaged the sail room for canvas scraps, and his Cunarder jacket was the first part of an all canvas suit that would outwear six lots of dungarees. Chips apparently had prospered in the colonies; for he had a very complete outfit of dunnage, he wore a thick gold ring, and as he moved about one might even hear that unbelievable sound, the jingle of coins in the pocket of an outward-bounder.

But he had been called a pensioner! A has-been! And as he finished making up his bunk, he paused in the act of giving the flaunting red curtains a flick and glowered through the door at Old Sails' broad back.

"Hoodlum!" he snarled, and stepped outside. All day there had rankled in his head a vague grievance. He knew there was a score between him and Sails, but could not put his finger on the exact item. He suddenly remembered that a man who had nearly knocked him down when entering a bar for a snifter before going on board was big and useless, like Sails. The door had swung too sharply for him to see clearly, but he knew now, he knew.

"Here!" he shouted, suddenly appearing before Sails and shaking a calloused fist two inches from that busy individual's bulbous nose; "Here, y' fat farmer! I seen you afore, ain't I? Somewheres ashore?"

" 'Tain't unlikely," Sails replied, grinning up at the shaking fist unafraid. "I wuz jailer in Darlin'hurst once."

"Git up, y' big stiff! Git up an' I'll put a 'ead on y' as big as a forty gallon pot!" squealed Chips frantically. "It was you as nigh capsized me comin' out o' a pub this mornin'! 'Twas you as frightened the gal outer her wits, so's when I goes in and asks for a rum an' milk she calls up a bloomin' cop! Git up and put 'em up!"

"Chips!" the call came from aft. "Chips, lay aft and see the captain!"

"Aye aye, sir!" Chips growled, and left Sails with the dire threat to pay him for any berating he might be going to get. But he was only wanted on ship's business. Sails had signed on as sailmaker and able seaman; at times, in shorthanded ships, it was usual for the carpenter to sign as able seaman too. The *Loch Broom* was shorthanded in all truth, and Chips was simply asked if he wanted to get that extra pound or so a month in wages.

He had forgotten his grouch against his cabin mate when he returned, for the skipper had given him a gratifying drink of rum, permitting him to tilt the bottle, and he was not greatly concerned thereafter about anything except preparing for his first watch on deck.

As the watches were shaken down, the two old shellbacks naturally assumed the leadership of port and starboard gangs; and in the dogwatches two separate schools of unregenerate toughs flattered and niggled, bore tales and invented them for the sheer joy of watching these two old men glower and breathe vengeance at each other, ever coming nearer to open friction.

"One o' these days some 'at 'll break and he'll come down frum aloft like a sack o' spuds," Chips vowed darkly. A busy tongue passed the word along, and a twinkle which had always lurked in the eye of Old Sails, even while mouthing his wildest threats against Chips, faded away. He broke off in the middle of a humorously gruesome yarn about an unclean ship's cook who was found boiled in his own copper, and got up to pace the deck uneasily, chewing away on his quid as if in sore need of solace.

" 'Tain't no way to talk, that ain't," he grumbled. "A joke's a joke, but a cut rope ain't no joke. Be damned if I don't keep a leery eye on that old wood-butcher!"

Old Sails concealed the heart of a child in his broad breast for all his badgering of Chips. There was no vice in him; only a desperate thirst and a desolate exchequer had forced him to perpetrate that trick upon an unsuspecting barmaiden, and he was satisfied that she had been well repaid for her rum and milk with the educational benefits received in learning that caterpillars and beetles were bits of botany. As for his ragging of Chips, that was only the time-honored way of the sea. He wouldn't hurt Old Chips for a double whack of soft tack, and the Lord knew his gums would relish that luxury. But to talk of a chap coming down from aloft all of a heap—that was no way to do! Talked as if he knew something, too, did Chips.

Such state of mind was likely to breed evil, and both Chips and Sails took to watching each other like cats; their life together in the little box of a cabin was only possible because they were in different watches, never meeting except to call each other, or in the dogwatches. Never had it been necessary to call "All hands" so far. When such a time came, they might have to meet at the same rope, or on the same yard, and then the fellows in the forecastle would see what they'd see.

But the winds continued soft and balmy, the sea barely ruffled, the big ship slipped through it with a gently purring plash at the keen stem and smooth bows. It was neither good for a fast passage, nor useful to teach a raw crew seamanship. All it was good for was to turn the fat, good-tempered skipper into a lump of suety peevishness, and to breed in lazy, hulking forecastle rats who never were seaman, a spirit of discontent in spite of their regular eating and sleeping, and heat their blood to mischief.

ONE Sunday near Three Kings Islands—the ship was bound for Valparaiso to load for home—Old Sails decided to have a field day. In deep-sea lingo a field day means overhauling personal gear, airing and mending, turning donkey's breakfasts, and having an orgy of personal industry altogether. Donkey's breakfasts? Why, sailors' straw mattresses are donkey's breakfasts. There wasn't much necessity for Old Sails to turn his poor outfit upside down: he could always put his hand on every item of it without moving from his bunk. But he was a regular old whale in his habits, and contentedly went to work, his stubby jaws working busily upon the huge quid that was as much a part of him as his boots.

He looked a true son of Neptune, Old

Sails, as he sat there with the sun shining full upon him through the open door, his newly completed Cunarder and canvas pants spic and span upon his powerful old frame. And he was happy; if he cursed everybody who interrupted him with terrible and blood-chilling profanity, it was but his manner of showing his happiness.

Then Old Chips conceived a similar notion, and another Sunday went into the limbo of past days with its name for peace and goodwill shot to splinters.

Chips blustered in and began to overhaul his bunk. He had the upper bunk, because, wise in sea ways and the ways of ships off the Horn, he knew that the cabin would be awash kneedeep as often as not when the big winds came. Chips had been first; having a sea chest he had gone straight to the little cabin to deposit his clothes before going aft; Sails went aft first of all because he had no gear to stow. So Chips got the pick of the bunks.

There was as much difference between the bunks as between the men. Sails' bunk matched its owner: plain, without frills, bare enough for all to see every part of it. For lack of a luxurious donkey's breakfast, Old Sails slept on an ancient mizzen-royal folded into bed shape. His bedding consisted of one blanket out of the slops, the wool of which grew on an American bush instead of Australian sheep. For the rest, there were two or three old Fanny Adams' tins containing his whack of stores; a bit of board nailed bracketwise on which lay his tobacco and cutty pipe for bunk use; and his sailmaker's bag hung on the bulkhead at the foot.

Chips was a sybarite. He had prospered in Australia, and might have taken passage home in a steamer's cabin. But he liked the jingle of gold, and the *Loch Broom* asked no fare of him. His bunk was a gorgeous thing of sheets and counterpane, woolly blankets and eye-dazzling curtains. His pipes hung in a redwood rack; his stores were contained in a shiny outing case which also contained knife, fork, and spoon of rustless plate.

Old Sails ate with his sheath-knife; a bit of hardtack was all the spoon he needed.

On the appearance of Chips, Sails chucked everything into his bunk and went out. He came back in a moment for some tobacco and his sailmaker's bag. Chips stood aside with deadly politeness as the old chap's broad back, bent over the lower bunk, occupied most of the cabin space, and he snorted through his nose impatiently.

"When y've done I'll get to me bunk!" said Chips. There was no answer, unless a queer shaking of the broad back might be so interpreted. Chips scowled at the back and went on, his impatience developing into rage: "Y' ain't got so much dunnage y' can't find some 'at have y'?"

" 'Baccy's gone," retorted Sails, backing out and straightening his creaking old back. His eye was humorous, but there was a trace of irritation in his tone, for tobacco was about his only pleasure in those hard-up days. "Ain't seen it, 'ave you?"

"Me?" squealed Chips, frantically. "Me? There's y' bloody 'bacca on the ledge, y' blind bat!"

"Aye, them's noo plugs. I 'ad one wot I'd used from. Edge over to loo'ard a bit. Lemme see."

"See here, y' red-nosed old robber! D'ye mean to hint as I'd steal yer dirty 'bacca plug?" Chips stepped over the door sill and flung his cap on the deck. Sails stared at him innocently; saw that he was bubbling with fury, and mischievously added fuel to the flame.

"Dunno 'bout stealin'," he said indifferently. "Wouldn't put it past y' though." Sails pushed by the fuming old man and went out to the hatch, swinging his bag and biting away at a fresh plug of tobacco.

"I wouldn't put anythin' past a hombre as talks o' fetchin' a shipmate down frum aloft in a 'eap."

The lounging hands on the fore hatch, not seamanlike enough to hold field days, nor energetic enough to make better use of their Sunday than to loaf, broke into a crackle of enjoyment. Old Sails grinned too, for he could not see what they saw. The next instant a bony, rough-skinned fist whizzed around his head from behind and landed with a "sock" on his eye.

"Stand up an' fight!" yelled Chips. "Put 'em up, y' yaller-hided stuck-pig!" Sails dropped bag and tobacco and faced about. meeting a flurry of fists that took away his breath like a breaking crest of sea in the surf.

"Give a feller a chance!" he growled, and wrapped his arms about his head while catching his breath.

"Call me a thief? Say I stole y' 'bacca?"

Chips mouthed, dancing clumsily in an uncouth effort to mimic virile youth. Sails got clear for a second, and fell into a posture of offense, his red face frowning, his big fists revolving slowly.

"Go it, Syles! 'It 'im in the ol' bread-barge!" yelled Poplar Ike, a very ordinary seaman. "'Ere, bryke awye!"

The hatch roared with brutal mirth. There was no need to shout "Break away!" The two old men, both old enough to have grandsons fighting for championships, swung and ducked, missed and lost balance and breath, and did no more harm to each other than if they had been dancing; blows landed, but weakly, and none bothered to separate them and tell them how foolish they looked. The toughs looking on had hopes to the last that a wild punch might draw blood, and make the Sabbath complete for them. It remained for the young second mate, coming forward to unlock the fresh water pump for the daily issue, to see the shame of it and abruptly stop the burlesque fight.

The harm was done to the spirit, not to the body. Each claimed victory, and breathed dire assurances of what he would have done but for the interruption; both promised to renew hostilities whenever the other liked, and both secretly hoped it would not be too soon. Thumping hearts had to settle down a bit. Each had his following of flatterers; but Old Sails had a black eye, and that decided matters. That he had acquired it by means of a not very sportsmanlike blow, when Chips punched him from behind, made no difference; it was the only visible mark of combat between the combatants, and the recipient was the loser, according to the law of the forecastle.

THE ship crept on across the Pacific. Chips strutted the decks wearing the smirk of a victor. Whenever he passed close enough to Old Sails, he rubbed his hands like a Barmecide, wreathed his thin lips unctuously, and worked his elbows against his ribs like a cock at crow. One day, when all hands were on deck or aloft bending the stouter suit of sails for the coming of heavier weather, he rubbed his eye in an offensive manner at Sails as that harassed old salt was trying to steer a topgallantsail aloft on its clewlines without letting it tear against the top. Sails let go his rope to shake a fist at his tormentor, and the mischief was done. There was a job of sail mending for him, with the mates yelling themselves hoarse for the job to be done before dark.

That seemed to change Old Sails. Chips never let pass a chance to disparage the other's seamanship: the degree of professional jealousy between those old men reached a point where it would have been worth a year of learning to young sailors but for the niggling way in which it found expression. As for Old Sails, he fell into a quiet, sombre mood as the days went by. Every moment of his spare time he put in working upon a beautiful canvas hammock; a thing of consummate art in drawn-thread and knittle work; such a hammock, the mate said, as even the Old Man himself might be proud to be buried in. The remark brought back a faint twinkle to the brooding eyes of the sailmaker. Poplar Ike was interested in the hammock too.

"Gawd blimee, Syles, wot yer fink yer goin' ter do wiv a fing like that?" he wanted to know. Old Sails worked on, his square jaws grinding steadily at his quid. The little dock rat chattered on:

"'Fore it's done, yer won't want no bleedin' 'ammick. Orl the bleedin' gadgets yer workin' in it, an 'orl the funny ding-bats ov tossels an' lacin's. Wot yer doin' it for Ole Socks?"

"It'll be ready when it's wanted," Sails replied with a gruffness that caused the cockney to edge away and peer curiously at his weatherbeaten face.

"Blimee! Y' ain't finkin' ov bein' buried in it, is yer? The mate didn't mean nuffink, Syles, blimee 'e didn't! 'E meant the real Ole Man aft, Syles, not you."

"Who yer callin' old?" snapped Sails without looking up. "'Sides, I ain't reckonin' on gettin' dumped this v'yage, me lad. I be makin' this yer hammock, if y' must know, for me pal Chips. It'll fit 'im to a T when we lays 'im on a gratin' fer launchin', me son. Now run along and tell 'im."

The cockney went into the forecastle with many backward glances, none of which intercepted the slow grin that stole over the face of Old Sails. And the tale he told with all the one-adjectived stress of his kind, passed along to Chips, and curdled his blood through the sheer suggestiveness of the telling.

Day after day, dogwatch after dogwatch, Old Sails worked upon his splendid hammock. Even the skipper heard of it and trolled forward to criticise and admire.

"That's a bit of real sailorising, Sails," e conceded. "But why all the reef points? Never saw a hammock rigged that fashion efore."

He fingered a dangling row of double stops made of finely plaited sennit. Each was opposite to a worked eyelet on the other side of the hammock, and a fly of canvas ran the whole length inside the stops. Sails chuckled shakily, to the mild wonder of the skipper.

"Why, sir, them's a little idea o' mine for leepin' warm an' dry down around th' Horn. See, this fashion." He brought the wo sides together, adjusted the fly, and aced up a few of the stops. "When I be nsides o' this, wi' a blanket, d'ye see, sir, ll laced up like, it don't make a lot o' ifference whether me bunk's afloat or not, o it? I can swing high as I want to, an' t my beddin' be cotton or wool I be snug nd warm."

The skipper laughed as he told the mate t supper:

"That damned old miser of a Chips came o me with a cock-and-bull yarn that Sails as laying for him and meant to bury him that hammock! If he comes to you with ny such cuffer just set him to work adzing own that spare topmast. He's too well d, the weather's been too mild, and he eeds working up to clear the oakum out his fat head."

"What are the queer dinkuses he swears e to lash him up with sir?"

"Just lacings. Old Sails has something side his head besides the jawbones of an s. That's the finest combination hammock and sleeping bag I ever saw. I'm gog to have him make me one before we rt around Cape Stiff."

Old Sails called to Chips half an hour ter the skipper had left him.

"Hey, Chippy me lad! Come 'ere an' 's try this for length." That gave Chips comfort.

RUNNING into the Trades, a subtle change came over the two ancients. Sails cast off the sombre od that had briefly swept over him, d his ruddy face wore a smile again. He s once more the center of admiring listeners in the dogwatches, reeling off creepy yarns about corpses coming aboard in gales of wind, with winkles where the eyes ought to be and seaweedy hair; of amorous girls who stowed away for love of sailors in romantic ports far out of the beaten tracks, only to turn into Finnish witches that sucked the blood out of strong young able seamen and made seaboots out of their empty skins; of fine clippers that went to sea with miserly carpenters and dogsbody sailors that never were heard of again because the sailors frightened the carpenters to death and lost the ships out of pure uselessness.

By degrees Chips lost all his adherents. Full of superstition, he brooded for hours during the dark night watches, and became so surly that even his watch mates avoided him, themselves none too powerful of intellect, and very prone to dark influences as suggested by the creepy yarns of Old Sails. This avoidance served to accentuate the broodiness of Chips, until he regarded every man as an enemy, or at least a talebearer to his chief enemy. One day he came to the door of the little cabin and caught Sails in the act of measuring that hammock's length against the bunkboard. He left without revealing his presence, and asked permission of the mate to change berths with the cook. The mate laughed at him, as he had been told to do, and Chips went forward muttering darkly. That evening he took out all his cutting tools, adze, chisels, axes, even a couple of harpoon steels, and spent the entire dogwatch putting an edge to steel which had never lacked one.

He bundled his bedding into the carpenter's shop and slept on the bench, wedged in behind the vise.

He began to lose flesh, too, as the days continued hot and the ship crawled west. He had lost all the antic jubilation that followed his nominal victory over Old Sails. And Sails chuckled like an old magpie to see it. He had finished his hammock, and when Poplar Ike asked him about it he answered, so that Chips might hear:

"That's all ready, me lad. Only waitin' fer the proper time to use it."

Long baking under a torrid sun perhaps was responsible for the trouble: that, and some bales of jute shipped damp. The ship had no business to carry Indian jute to Chile ordinarily; but freights happened to be slack, and there was a parcel, just landed from Calcutta, wanted in Valparaiso, and in it went—damp. Chips reported his sounding rod hot one evening. He had dropped it down the sounding well as usual, had been called away for some few minutes, and had left the rod down until he returned. It was warm. The ship made no water, the rod was dry, and it was warm.

He told the second mate about it just as the skipper came up from below with an anxious look on his face and the remark that the barometer had fallen three-tenths in an hour.

"This isn't another bit of damn foolishness, is it Chips?" the skipper said.

"The rod's warm, sir," Chips asserted. "An' I dunno what foolishness you mean, sir."

"Then I'll tell you!" retorted the skipper. The situation was such as to excuse a little warmth, if Chips were right. "All the passage you've been bellyaching about what Old Sails means to do to you. That's all in your eye, and so I've told you. Now you tell me the ship may be on fire. There's a big wind coming, and a fire atop of all will be hell for all hands before we get through. If you're imagining—"

Chips snorted and abruptly ran down the poop ladder with his sounding rod. He knelt down at a sounding pipe.

"Better take the light sails off her," the skipper told the second mate. "Carry on with your lower to 'gallants'ls awhile until the wind comes steadier from one point. Smells to me like a real sneezer a-brewing."

"Leggo r'yal halliards and flyin' jib!" roared the officer, and the men tumbled over each other and fell foul of Chips as they blundered among the ropes. "Flyin' jib downhaul! Clew up all three royals, and up an' furl 'em! Couple o' hands furl the flyin' jib, and make all fast good!" He scowled darkly at the lumbering movements of the men, who only found the right ropes when placed in their hands by the bosun or Old Sails; and then his eye fell upon the kneeling figure of Chips, and he grinned as he met the skipper's glance.

"Chips has a fine imagination, sir," he remarked. "The whole watch trod all over him, and he never stirred. He must think waiting'll heat the iron."

"Hope it is imagination!" snapped the skipper.

Chips came aft again, the iron nursed tenderly in both hands. He had his proof.

The skipper took the jointed rod. His own face grew grim. He glanced around the horizon, lingered awhile at the northeast quadrant, and told Chips to put away his rod and stand by. To the second mate he said quietly:

"Call the mate. Then turn out all hands, aye, cook and steward, too. Tell the mate to bring me some idea how the cargo is stowed where the jute is."

THERE was nothing of the blustering braggart about the big wind that came. Out of the long rolling sea small foam-tips first appeared; from the blue-gray sky the blue faded until all was gray; slowly the breeze changed from light puffs to mild blasts, and from mild to fierce. Long before the wind amounted to savagery, the mate had produced a word picture of the jute stowage.

"It's all stowed in one block clear from the floor of the hold to the main-hatch. Cases of mutton and rabbit for'ard of it, and the Newcastle coal aft, bulkheaded off, sir."

"H'm," was the skipper's only comment. It was expressive. There was plenty of sea room for the *Loch Broom* even though she were forced to run before the wind; but in the direction to which she must run, if at all, the vast Pacific lay bare of land, and unpromising of other ships. After poring over the chart for many thoughtful minutes, with many a glance at the barometer, the skipper called his two mates to him and put an end to indecision.

"That coal is the trouble," he said. "But for that, I'd carry on, and try to make the coast before lifting a hatch. Perhaps it might be the best way now, but I'll not chance it. Take in fore and mizzen to'gallants'ls, all stays'ls, and main and mizzen courses and spanker. I'll run before whatever's coming, and keep the fire from creeping aft. When all's snug, muster the hands."

When the first of the gale struck, the *Loch Broom* turned with stately dignity and ran from it as if there were no disgrace in declining such a conflict. By that time Old Sails had sniffed smoke in the air with that keen, red, bulbous old nose of his, and had kept his tongue between his teeth, seeing from signs not visible to all that the officers were aware of it. Then the shout came to muster, and he found himself beside Chips, each with his watch behind him, facing the skipper and mates on the poop above. The steward stood at the head of one ladder, the cook at the other; and each bore a great copper pot and a tin pannikin which aroused pleasant anticipations.

"Gawd blimee, wot's they lookin' s' bleedin' black fer?" muttered Poplar Ike. He could not understand why anybody should look displeased with rum in prospect, and what else could those copper pots contain? They were in use every Saturday night, when the time-honored custom of drinking to sweethearts and wives was followed aboard that fine old clipper. Old Sails jabbed him in the stomach with his elbow, and Ike subsided with a grunt. The skipper's hand was raised.

"Men," he said, "I'll not belittle your intelligence by keeping the truth from you." A growl of scorn from Old Sails. "Intellijunce!" he spat; but his face was childlike, upturned to listen. "The ship's on fire," said the skipper. "There's a bad breeze o' wind making up, and it'll be 'all hands' until the fire's out. Come up, one by one, and splice the main-brace, my lads, then get to work like the stout bullies you are."

"Maybe shan't want that hammick arter all, to bury Ol' Chips in!" Old Sails uttered the thought aloud, with a roaring laugh that almost made him swallow his quid. It made his eyes blink; but perhaps the smoke did that, anyway.

"Blast th' smoke!" he growled. He was in darkness, suffocating, warm, Stygian darkness. Even the double tot of rum had failed to put the courage of the volunteer into the foremost hands. A man was wanted to creep in under the hatch, which could not be left off, and try to locate the smouldering peril. Even Chips had hung back, grumbling something about being an old man. Sails had gone, while Chips held up a corner of the hatch cover. Now he was crawling over the jute bales, trying to determine with his hands which appeared to feel hottest, and the sweat blinded him as he worked his way between bales and dockhead at the farthest corner of the hatch square from where he had entered.

As he uttered his whimsical thought, followed by the anathema of the smoky reek, he fancied he heard a movement nearby that was not attributable entirely to the ship's motion. He painfully twisted his body towards the sound, caught a glimpse of misty daylight suddenly shut off as if by the swift closing of the hatch corner and heard the distant reverberation of shouts of alarm. The next instant the big ship leaned over, over until Sails slid to leeward helplessly, and the decks above his head thundered with the impact of falling tons of water.

"Bloody farmers musta let 'er broach!" swore Sails, clawing up towards the high side, his old head battered from contact with the iron beams, his tough fingernails all but torn from the quicks in his precipitous slide. "Hey! 'oo's that" he shouted. He again fancied he heard something, and now it sounded more like a muffled voice. But before an answer could be given, or the question repeated, that tremendous thunder roared overhead again, the ship rolled down until her beams were pointing upwards, and still again the crash of terrific seas made of the iron interior a chaos of noise.

Old Sails felt the movement of shifting bales beneath him. He knew instinctively what had happened. It needed no faintly echoing thud at the hatch to tell him that the wedges were being put in hurriedly, to save the hatches from being wrenched off because the miserable apologies for helmsmen had let the vessel come broadside to the gale, to be swept by mile long seas that heaved and dropped their hissing tons upon the deck.

He could easily picture the condition of things on deck. A maze of snaking ropes, the green seas pouring over the six-foot bulwarks, carrying men and ropes and all things movable fore and aft in one ghastly mess. He could imagine, and laugh at the image, the fat skipper and the sour mate, and perhaps the young second mate too, fighting with the mishandled wheel to get the ship off before the wind again.

Something cracked. He heard that distinctly. Then he felt for a second an eddy of air, and in the next instant a swirling puff of greater heat from the smouldering fire beneath him. His eyes were smarting, and his quid tasted vilely. But he heard the seas pouring across the hatches, heard the hammer and crash of something broken and adrift on deck, and then the heat came up to him in a wave. Feeling something like fear for the first time, he commenced to claw his way towards the invisible hatch, finding direction by groping for a beam, then judging forward from aft by feeling the rivet-heads of the stanchions. There was no cessation to the uproar above; no diminishing of the heeling angle until he had got his hands to the square of the hatch. Then he felt the ship slowly come up, he heard the whistling roar of the sea and wind, and felt again that eddy of cool air, which he knew did not come from the main hatch. With a vague notion of attracting attention on deck, he punched at the wooden cover at the corner through which he had entered. He might as well have punched at the ship's iron side.

HE PUZZLED his brain about that cool air. It was eddying through the hold, and the heat beneath him grew with each successive eddy. He hammered again at the hatch. He shouted. The only response he got was a muffled cry from the other end of the hatch. He fumbled in his pocket for a fresh quid of tobacco, his throat was too dry to make shouting a success, he thought; then he crawled back over the bales towards that cry, cursing impartially all unable seamen, stowaways, and stevedores who stowed damp jute next to soft coal.

"Who's there?" he cried again, when his fresh quid had begun to work smoothly.

"Me! Git a move on!" came the whimpering reply. There was no familiar note in the voice, except the whimper. That was common in times of stress to every man forward, except Old Sails himself.

The violent motions of the ship, now she was running before the gale again, hurled him against iron beams, and all but brained him; the giddy plunges of the loosening bales tore the skin from hands and knees; stanchions met him apparently in mid-air, like hammers bent upon his destruction. And ever the heat grew. He knew by nose, throat, and eyes that the smoke was near suffocating density. Plunging a hand down between two loosened bales, he drew it back sharply.

"Who an' wot in hell are you?" he demanded querulously as a whimper reached him from somewhere close at hand.

"It's me—Chips!"

"Why, y' bloody ol' fool! Wot y' doin' here anyway?"

Groping blindly, Old Sails presently felt an oilskinned leg. A shivery sort of groan issued from the blackness, and then silence, except for the demoniacal uproar of the laboring ship. He swore fervidly, and hauled at the leg. It had a queer detached feeling in his hand, as if it belonged to nobody. Another gentler tug persuaded him that the leg was at least broken.

"Hey! Y' gorn off like a snivelling gal? Shake a leg!" Sails coughed in the bitter reek. He felt strange about the forehead and eyes; his chest seemed to have flattened in on his lungs, somehow. And that old hoodlum of a Chips must go and faint.

"Wot in hell y' come down here for I dunno!" he coughed, and burrowed with his arms, trying to turn the inanimate form about.

Having secured a grip on Chips' shoulders, Old Sails had a vague notion of dragging him towards the cool draft that was surely fanning the smouldering fire into flame. As he dragged, he knew Chips was not quite unconscious, for he wrenched a groan from him. A heavy lurch of the ship catapulted both headlong up on the rough boards of the coal bulkhead, and the sharp agony awoke Chips to a keener consciousness of the position.

"That's you, ol' timer," he babbled. "Keep on a-goin' an' try for the booby hatch. I got a hose some'eres about there."

"Ho! So you kin chatter a bit, hey?" growled Sails, laboring heavily. "Then wot brought y' down 'ere, gittin' in the way of a better man! Here, lend a 'and, if y' 're awake, y' ol' crab!"

The cool air was appreciably fresher. It poured across the top of the coal bulkhead. And the hubbub of the deck sounded louder. Chips stopped a groan to curse, and whimpered again, but he fastened his clawlike hands to the wrist of Old Sails, and made him hear:

"Got a hose down th' booby hatch— Couldn't haul it alone— Tried to get to you. The sea chucked her over, and I got pitched ag'in the beams." Chips was sinking into coma again, but before he ceased babbling Old Sails caught something that made him cough and curse in a breath.

"Lot o' left-legged 'oodlums. Only us two sailormen. Mus' carry on—" murmured Chips.

"Why, y' ol' snoozer! Blast th' man he's gorn off ag'in!"

To surmount the bulkhead, Old Sails had to tear down two planks from the top. He d no sense of time or place, but only an erpowering urge to reach that dim patch radiance now in sight, which he realized ıs the smashed booby hatch. That loud ack he had heard must have been the sea mmering upon it. Every breath was a orching torment; Chips was as heavy as e port anchor, and his corners took hold fast. The snaky line of a leather hose t him between the eyes, and he rose to s knees swearing with shocking irritation the thing for not remaining where it lay, ver realizing that his own forehead had tched down upon it.

As he struggled forward into the square smoky light, he heard voices, and was mly aware that men dropped down to m. He let go of Chips, took hold of the se, and blindly crawled forward again, agging it along, dumbly wondering when e water was to come.

WHEN the threat of fire had been conquered by the two mates and the cook, by help of the hose ragged along by Old Sails, the crew gath- ed around a crippled, crying carpenter ho fought against being taken aft to the bin to have his hurts attended to, de- anding to be put into his own bunk.

"Wot's good enuf fer Ol' Sails is good uf fer me, I tell yer!" he growled. Lemme go tell that ol' fool wot I think him now!"

They bore him aft, where the skipper d mate set his leg, bandaged his burns, d soothed his torn skin with unguents. ey were strangely quiet about it, taking all heed of Chip's peevish ravings.

They laid him in a bed made up on a ker in the saloon, then dodged their way ward to the tiny six by nine box of a cabin where Old Sails lay. Some of the crew hung about the door, and were not driven away with oaths, which was amazing, for the ship still weltered in the midst of watery desolation. Two men, closely conned by the second mate, contrived to steer her with a measure of security. The wide decks were shiny under the scouring seas that still poured across them through broken bulwarks. The galley had been torn from its ringbolts and lay temporarily lashed down across the forehatch. But there was a break in the slatey pall of the heavens; the vicious seas seemed less spiteful than before; the gale softened at intervals and let the straining canvas on the yards pour streams of cold water down upon all and sundry beneath, where before it had taken the streams and shot them like bullets athwart men's beaten faces.

"Hullo, Sails, let's see what we can do for you," said the mate, entering and standing aside for the skipper to look the old chap over. On the face of it not much could be humanly done. Old Sails was even then going about on his last tack before fetching the haven of Fiddler's Green. But his twisted old face struggled into a faint grin at the touch of the skipper's hand, and he shook his grizzled old head.

"All in, Cap'n. Slippin' me cable. Tell Ol' Chippy I wuz only foolin' with him about that hammick. Tell him—" a chuckle that was in fact an awful paroxysm escaped the tortured lips—"Tell him he'd orter grin once in a while, then men wouldn't think he was such an ol' squid. Too good a sailor—on'y one in th' ship—"

"Shall I get the bosun to sew him up, sir?" asked the mate.

"Aye, in his new hammock," answered the skipper.

In the next issue Millard Ward gives us "Ordeal," another tale of the sea's eternal justice.

A Tale of Dangerous Airways

SOUTH of TIA JUANA

By RAOUL F. WHITFIELD

JOHNNY HARMER met me at Calexico. He was a big red-headed individual with a voice that boomed. I'd known Johnny before he and his brother got the big concession down in lower Imperial Valley, before they'd ditched water down the American Waterway Canal. Johnny looked younger than ever, browner and harder. After our first greetings were over he got right down to business. That was like the man.

"Not sure you want to fly in, Mac," he stated. "But when you wrote you were taking thirty-day leave, well, it's something like the old stuff. Tough and getting tougher every day. They got Madden two days ago and forty thousand American cash. I'm getting riled, Mac."

I nodded. "Who got Madden and how?" I asked. "And where, and why?"

Johnny lifted a bony-fingered hand. It was scarred, and I reflected that it held one sweet trigger-finger. A few years ago it did, anyway.

"Coming fast, sonny," he boomed. "They shot him down eight miles west of the northwest corner of our land. Nothing but mesquite down there, mesquite and sand, with the Cocopah hills a bit to the west. Plane riddled with Browning bu lets. When the coin didn't come in Ja went sky-riding in the ancient Jenny. E located the ship, and got down beside he Madden was wandering around in a da with a bad smash in the head. I'll let hi tell you how they got him, if you'll fly with me. Who did it? How the de would I know? It's bad country, Ma but you know that."

I nodded. There was much about th concession stretch running southeast fro Tia Juana that I knew, and a lot I did know. Two years of test-piloting at Ro Field had made me a bit stale. I rated thirty-day leave, and Johnny Harme wire made me grab it.

"I've got a D.H. at the artillery fie here," Johnny was booming on. "You c rig prop-synchronized Brownings on h when we get down to the ranch. I've g sixty Cholos, Chinks and Japs working th cotton and they're restless when they do get coin. The narrow gauge railroad is risk; Jake plans to fly the money in pre quick. We figured you might want to ta an air-seat in the game, with a couple well-lined guns in front of you. Wh say?"

I swore softly. Johnny knew darned ll what I'd say. But I said it, anyway. d the red-head who had once com- nded one of the fastest-flying, straight- t-shooting pursuit squadrons in the ncy-Toul sector grinned at me.

"Fine as hell!" he commented. "Let's t this ship. A joy-hopper is selling her; 's got religion and wants to feel his feet ch earth. It's a sweet buy at four thou- d, with plenty of equipment. We'll say llo to the Border boys and then fly into xican air. Right?"

"Perfect!" I came back, and we went t into the heat, and headed for the ar- lery field and the joy-hopper who owned e ship.

MESQUITE. Miles and miles of it! And the concession line, running southeast from Tia Juana, dig- g into Mexico anywhere from two to enty miles. We were flying at eight usand, and over that flat country, in e clear atmosphere, we could see a great tance. Almost directly below the plane- ght path was the black ditch that was the erican Waterway. She came down from e American side; the irrigation of the cessions has a source in the Coyote lls, over in the foot-hills of the Sierra dre Range. The narrow-gauge railroad s off to the east; to the west was the opah Mountains, running along near e blue water of the Pacific. The mes- te was grey-blue, the sand white. It s hot; the glare came up against the e of the sky. We'd cut over from Cal- o, heading southeast from Mexicali l we'd struck the concession line.

"We've made money down here Mac, not denying that. But we've worked. protection, with the Cholos hating ything that's white and talks. Duxley, Englishman, he shot it out with an ed bunch a few weeks ago. Drove 'em y from his ranch. Mex, most of 'em, he spotted a white man in the back- nd. Renegade American, ten to one. s of 'em down here."

nodded my head from the front cock- The D.H. flew right; we'd strapped ne-sets over our helmets, talking was . I jerked my head to the right, banked ship a bit. The Laguna Salada glit- d blue-green in the sun, back of us and below. It was a salt lake, and in the old days I'd used it as a marker when the weather was bad.

"This Madden," I asked, "is he all right? Playing on the level?"

My eyes were on thatch-roofed shacks below. The field workers of the cotton lived in them. A bare room and a lean-to, right out among the sand ridges between which the water from the ditch was allowed to flow. One crop of cotton a year and a whale of a crop at that.

"Madden? He's all right," Johnny replied through the 'phone-set, from the rear cockpit. "He's flown up plenty of pay-roll coin in the last six months. And he was cracked up pretty badly in the crash. Swing off to the right here Mac, hold her there! About twelve miles, and we're over the wrecked Jenny. Want to go down and look her over?"

I nodded. Jake and Johnny Harmer—going down into Mexico after the war, and getting a real concession. Fighters both, flyers both. When a guy mixed with the Harmers—

We were diving now, with the throttle pulled back a few notches and the wind screaming through the flying wires shrilly. At two thousand I leveled off, used my eyes for a few minutes and spotted the cracked-up ship.

It was a deserted stretch. No 'dobe houses in sight, not even anything with a thatch roof on it. The land wasn't being worked, it was just mesquite and sand and off to the west the brown, sparse slopes of the Cocopahs. We flew over the wrecked plane and I banked around in a wide circle.

"Got a Cholo named Pedro down there watching the ship," Johnny stated. "Sleeping under a wing, ten to one."

I nodded. "Got to hand it to this fellow Madden," I told Johnny. "Look how he picked his spot. Didn't even tangle with mesquite. Nothing but sand where he hit."

Johnny didn't say anything to that one. I jerked my head and saw that he was staring over the side.

"Hey!" he shouted suddenly into the mouthpiece of the 'phone-set. "There's Pedro, lying on his back out there in the sun. Fifty yards from the ship—"

Johnny broke off. We were almost ready to touch the sand, and I didn't look for Pedro. But I let Johnny have my thought.

"Drunk," I guessed, and felt the D.H. hit in a pretty fair three-point landing.

Then I held the stick pretty far back and let her roll to a stop.

I snapped the safety-belt buckle, got out on a wing and looked toward the rear cockpit. Johnny wasn't there. Hopping down to the mottled sand, I spotted him trotting off toward a figure sprawled not far from the wrecked Jenny. It was my idea that my old C. O. had pulled a bad one in leaving a Cholo to watch something. There was too much bad hooch in Mexico.

I TROTTED after him. It was about three in the afternoon; the sun tried to wilt me as I walked. Coming up behind Johnny, I started to say something that I figured might be funny. But I stopped.

"Well," Johnny muttered. "I was right about one thing—he's sleeping, all right. Only—" Johnny's voice was very grim, "it's a sort of permanent sleep!"

I stared down. There was a red-black mark on Pedro's forehead, another just under his left eye. His face was streaked with red. Close at hand was a rifle, or what was left of one. The stock had been smashed, the barrel was bent. Johnny swore.

"They got him!" he muttered. "And look what they did to his rifle. Trying to show me how much they care about—"

He broke off. I was walking toward the wrecked ship. Johnny came up behind me, a puzzled expression on his lean face. He climbed up on what was left of the port wing surface, inspected both cockpits, then dropped back to the sand again.

"Nothing touched in there," he muttered. "Nothing there worth touching. But I had Pedro here to keep these stray renegades from taking the tires and—"

He checked himself, walked back toward the body of the Mexican. I tagged along.

"What happened, then?" I asked slowly. "Did this Pedro have enemies who might have—"

Johnny Harmer grunted. "He was working for me!" he snapped. "He had enemies, all right!"

Then he leaned down and lifted the body of Pedro in his long, strong arms. He strode toward the D.H. I started to trail along behind him, but he called over a shoulder.

"You wanted to look that Jenny over Mac, there's no hurry, not now."

His voice was grim. I went back a spent ten minutes walking around t wrecked plane, inspecting the bullet hol in her wings and engine hood, looking ov what was left of her shattered prop. Wh I got back, Johnny had the dead Cho propped up in the rear cockpit. It ga me a bit of a shock, seeing the m strapped in the cushioned seat, and I gue I showed it. Anyway, Johnny Harm looked at me and grinned. It was exactly a cheerful grin.

"Well, do you stick, Mac? Or ba north, where you can strut your stuff wi the newspaper boys to—"

"Shut up, Johnny!" I snapped, and grinned more broadly than ever. "Clin in back there and we'll get over to th ranch of yours."

The grin faded. There was a sco on his face now. Without a word he g a foot in the fuselage slit-step, squeez into the rear cockpit. I got on a wing, sl in back of the stick. I hadn't cut the e gine, had left her throttled down. reeved up a bit and then rolled forward. didn't turn my head, and every once in while Johnny gave me directions, throu the 'phone connections. He told me wh we were passing the Brace concessi Duxley's place, the Cudeby outfit. Th he pointed out his own 'dobe house, wi a lot of smaller houses around it, set nicely with some green stuff coming out of the white sand. A hundred and miles south of Tia Juana.

I got her in a glide, watched the Paci blue fade out of sight behind the mou tains to the west. Johnny sang out spot he wanted me to hit and we hit it pretty fair shape. The rubber tires jounc over the sand and I threw in the brak

I climbed down, and we got Pedro the sand. When I straightened up th was Jake Harmer, hand outstretched, grin on his face. Jake was a runt; m than a foot shorter than his brother. flying fool, he'd been.

"Welcome to the land of lead and-

Then he saw Pedro's body, and stiffened. He looked down for several mi utes, then raised his eyes to mine. /Th was a grim smile lurking now in th gray depths.

"Hell!" he commented. "I'm late w the welcome—you've already had a pre good one."

MADDEN, his head bandaged and his right wrist smeared with iodine, sprawled in the chair and talked. He was tall and lanky, and he talked with almost a drawl.

"It's not the strangest thing in the world to see a ship flying the valley," he said. "The Japs, down south of here, use a couple of them. Jennies, at that. So I just held my course. I was around four thousand and this other bird was flying about six or seven. He seemed to be cutting in from the Cocopahs, flying northeast. We passed within a few thousand feet of each other, I waved. One man in the front cockpit of a two-seater, that was all I saw. He didn't wave back—the next thing I knew there were bullets tearing through the wings, battering the engine hood. I could hear the machine-gun clatter as I got into a spin. She came out of it sluggishly, and I thought we'd lose a wing. Then she got into a slip. The sand was coming up fast, I pulled her out of the slip, got her in a stall. We hit on a wing, with no forward speed, and a few struts and wires let go. One of 'em caught me in the head—one of the strut-splinters, I figure. Don't know how long I was out. But when I came back to things, and hauled myself over for a look in the rear cockpit, the coin was gone."

Madden stopped, lighted a cigaret. Johnny Harmer swore, his brother just grunted. I said nothing.

"We carried the money in a black bag. Two rifles in the rear cockpit." It was Johnny who spoke. "But we didn't figure on trouble in the air. That's why we've been flying the payroll cash."

I nodded. The thing that was bothering me was why Pedro had been murdered—and Madden not finished off. I put it to the three men on the screened porch of the 'dobe house.

"Might be they wanted the coin and didn't stop to see how badly they'd damaged Madden. As for Pedro, there's no way of figuring that. Day after tomorrow Jake goes in for more cash. Can you get the guns rigged and tested in that time, Mac? I'm a little stiff along that line—but I can help, of course." It was Johnny who spoke.

I nodded. Madden was frowning; he felt his injured wrist gingerly.

"They'll let you get through this time, all right," he stated, after a little silence. "Won't go at it too strong, unless I'm all wrong."

"We'll play safe," Johnny said in a grim tone. "That's the only way—south of Tia Juana."

WE HAD the Brownings synchronized to shoot through the blades of the whirling DeHaviland propeller, a few hours before dusk, on the day after my arrival. Jake made a few 'chutes—small ones to use as targets—and climbed into the rear cockpit of the D.H. We took off, climbed upward in a series of wide circles. I looked the country over as we gained altitude. It was three years since I'd flown over the valley.

Black Butte raised its five-hundred-foot hump out of the jungle growth around its base, to the southeast. I could spot the pampas grass far to the east, and off to the west could see the rich foliage of the watershed from the Cocopah Mountains. Many streams trickled westward into the Pacific off the slopes but the valley was a white desert. The only water lay back in the American Waterway ditch.

"Here goes, Mac!" Jake's voice brought me back to the business at hand. "Bank and dive!"

I did both and got my ring sights on that drifting, small 'chute. At fifty yards I squeezed the stick-trigger, both Brownings clattered. The 'chute got all tangled up with itself, fell like a dropped handkerchief, as I banked the D.H. off.

"Rattled her with lead!" Jake shouted through the head-set connections. "Cut her weight loose. Here's another—"

He broke off, and I caught a smothered exclamation. As we leveled off I looked over the side. We were almost above the 'dobe ranch house; there was considerable excitement down below. Figures were running across the corral. From the smaller 'dobe houses around the ranch house workers were piling—Chinks, Cholos, white workers.

For a second I thought we'd pulled a bad one in shooting so near to the ranch. If the spent lead had struck some one down below—

Then I spotted her. She was flying low, and she was a single-seater. Even as I yelled through the 'phone-set to Jake, and got the D.H. over in a steep dive, I saw that she'd cut right across the ranch, about fifty feet off the ground. And she'd done damage, that was clear from the excitement on the ranch.

Nerve? I'd say that the bird had nerve. He must have seen us up above; ten to one he'd seen me taking shots at the falling 'chute. And still he'd flown over the ranch and raised hell in general. At least, that was the way I figured it.

We had a forty-five degree dive, and an engine almost wide open. We gained on that single-seater. We gained as long as we were in the dive. I wanted to keep altitude, and leveled off at five hundred feet. The pilot of the single-seater wanted speed, he didn't climb. Fifty feet off the flat sand and mesquite, he headed northwest, toward the shadowed eastern slopes of the mountains.

"Don't shoot him down! Signal him to land, Mac! He may not have done any damage—"

Jake's voice trailed off. We were roaring through the sky after the single-seater but his words were a fine mockery. The little plane was flying away from us. Shoot him down or signal him down—there was not a chance.

We followed for more than thirty miles, then I lost him. Lost the grey-blue surfaces of the wings, the fuselage, against the black of the hill-shadows. That plane was fast, and it was well camouflaged. I banked, climbed a bit, headed back toward the ranch.

My head was filled with thoughts. How much damage had the single-seater done? Madden had said the fellow who had shot him down had been flying a two-seater. How many ships were working against Johnny and Jake Harmer?

WE landed, and climbed down from the D.H. Johnny was running toward us from the 'dobe walls of the corral; we both turned toward him.

"Get him?" he breathed, and I saw that his face was grim.

"Too fast, Johnny," I stated. "Did he shoot down at you?"

Johnny drew a deep breath. He ran his bony fingers through the red of his hair.

"Madden was walking over to the mess-shack," he said slowly. "The fellow dove at him, fired a burst, then circled and came back. Madden dropped flat, crawled along and the pilot of that single-seater tried a second time. Then you came down after him and he winged off."

I stared at Johnny. "How about Madden?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Missed him," he muttered. "But he tried hard enough to get him. And he must have seen you up there, Mac. How about that D.H.? Can you mix with him and have a chance?"

I didn't answer that one right away. I was thinking of Madden. They knew that he'd been flying for the Harmer boys. The single-seater pilot had nosed down, clattered lead at Madden, had even doubled back. And there was Pedro, who had been left to watch the wreck of the Jenny.

"How about it, Mac?" Johnny was asking the question again. "If Jake flies in the pay-roll can you fight that single-seater off?"

"There was a two-seater the last time," I reminded. "Got to have the money, Johnny?"

He scowled. "The boys are getting restless," he returned. "If they think some one has got us licked—"

"They haven't!" I snapped. "The thing I don't get is why they're after Madden, why they murdered Pedro. If it's the money they're after, the game would be to let you think they'd cleared out. One try—successful—and done with it. As it is they're only warning us, making us more prepared, careful."

Johnny Harmer shook his head. He spoke grimly.

"You don't know the valley, Mac. They fight it out down here, hang on until they're licked all the way. Two planes have spilled lead at us now—perhaps two different pilots. But only one man back of it, Mac, one man driving at us, trying to make us quit. It's the way they work."

I nodded my head. We got the ship under the thatch-roofed hangar, next to an old J.N.4. Then we walked slowly back toward the house. Jake spoke as we neared it.

"You ripped that 'chute nicely, Mac. If you tangle with a plane, tomorrow—it'll be a scrap."

I nodded. Madden was at the door. He looked pretty white, and complained of a nasty headache.

"Hit the sand pretty hard when that fellow dove for me," he stated. "Wish I felt up to riding along with you tomorrow, MacAndrews."

Johnny Harmer swore softly. We talked for an hour or more—wondered where the single-seater pilot had landed, whether he had seen us up there having target practice. Madden turned in early; the three of us made plans, talked until late. We decided that Johnny and Jake would fly in the Jenny—I'd pick them up a few miles out of Tia Juana, flying alone. The money was coming out of a San Diego bank; I couldn't very well cross the lines with mounted guns. They'd have only a couple of high-power rifles. Coming back, I'd get up high, all set for a dive toward the first ship that got too close to the Jenny.

"Here's hoping we get the coin in without trouble," Jake muttered, after a little silence following the discussion.

But Johnny didn't see it that way. He grunted, and his grey eyes met mine.

"Here's hoping they tackle us—and Mac tackles them!" he stated savagely. "There's only one game to play, south of Tia Juana —a winning game!"

I just nodded. But I did considerable thinking before I dozed off. There were two ways of figuring things. One way had us licked, according to my dope, before we started. The other way gave us a chance. And the other way was the one I liked best. After I got that settled I slept.

JOHNNY and Jake Harmer took off around ten o'clock in the morning. They had some business to attend, besides getting the pay-roll made up, and it was seldom that they got away from the concession. I spent the morning tinkering with the D.H., checking up on the Brownings. I was to meet them at three o'clock, and had better than an hour's air flight to the sky-spot at which I figured on picking them up. At one-thirty I went after Madden. He hadn't showed up, and I found him just finishing dressing, in his room at one end of the rambling, main house. He gave me a sallow-faced smile as I entered.

"Feel rotten," he stated. "Suppose you're about ready to take off. I'm wishing you luck, MacAndrews."

I nodded. "Are you?" I asked him quietly. "Well, that's good. Because in wishing me luck you're wishing yourself the same thing."

He stiffened, and for a split second I saw in his eyes what I'd expected to see. Then he laughed.

"Too deep!" he muttered. "Come again."

I grinned. His hands were on the edge of the cot on which he was seated—when my automatic came out of its shoulder holster. His eyes widened, he started to speak. Then he changed his mind again, and waited.

"You're sky-riding with me, Madden!" I snapped. "And we're due to get above the mesquite within fifteen minutes."

He swore. "What in hell's the matter with you?" he muttered. "The heat's got—"

"Snap into it!" I cut in. "I looked that two-seater over, the one you crashed. You stalled her down, cracked yourself in the head and cachéd that coin. The bullet holes were made by your pal's gun but you weren't in that ship when he made them. Not so good, Madden. The lead that went through the wings tore up the sand around that ship. You didn't get hit in the air, not by a damn' sight! You're crooked, Madden!"

He was rigid, his lips twitching and white. There was no color in his face; his fingers dug into the thin blanket covering the cot.

"You wanted to make sure the boys didn't suspect you," I went on grimly. "So you had your pal fly that single-seater over, and pretend to shoot at you. He didn't come within thirty feet of you, Madden. You knew he had a faster ship than the D.H. so you let him come in regardless of my rigged guns. What happened to Pedro?"

I crackled that question at him. He was almost all in, anyway, and I figured that might finish him. But it didn't. He tried to bluff.

"You're mad!" he muttered thickly. "When the boys come in—"

"You murderer!" I interrupted grimly. "Why did you shoot down Pedro?"

He didn't answer. His lips twitched, but he didn't let out a word. I shifted the muzzle of my gun a half an inch, squeezed the trigger. There was a sharp report. Madden screamed hoarsely. I laughed. A bullet doesn't dig into 'dobe walls very far.

"The next time," I said slowly, "it'll be closer. Come through, Madden—we haven't much time!"

And he came through. I didn't wait to hear all of it. But he babbled enough. Then I stopped him, got his wrists behind his back, and used a set of steel cuffs on them. His gun was in its holster, on a small table—and I let it stay there.

"Now, get this!" I warned him. "There's no dual control in this D.H. You're riding the rear cockpit and I'm not giving you a 'chute. You're getting better than an even break. When we get up above you head me in a dead air-line for this Mendez ship. If I catch him on the ground, before he takes off, it'll be safer for both of us. If I have to tackle him in the air—"

I stopped. Madden got me, all right. A fast single-seater with a single gun against a slower-maneuvering D.H., with two guns. A tough air-scrap that would be. Madden didn't want any of it, that was a cinch. As for me, I was more than willing to catch this fellow Mendez before he got off the mesquite and sand.

"Get up!" I snapped. "Head for the hangar!"

WE had ten thousand feet of altitude, and we were flying northwest. Sixty miles distant, over in the shadow of the Cocopahs, was the resting place of the Mendez single-seater, according to Madden. This Mendez was a clever flyer, and a good shot. Madden had fallen in with him in a gambling place at Mexicali—Mendez was running the job. After he finished with the Harmers, well, there were the other concession holders in the valley.

I smiled grimly. It was something like old-times. At our altitude I could see over the whole width of the strip. The Gulf of California to the east, the Pacific to the west. Black Butte rising back of us, cotton and mesquite below. But we were edging over toward the mountains. I throttled down, leveled off after a dive of three thousand feet. Before we'd taken off I had pulled the 'phone-set over Madden's helmet.

"Headed right?" I asked cheerfully.

"Good enough," he came back. "Don't let him get above you, MacAndrews. If he does—"

I laughed. Madden was whining now. If his pal Mendez put lead into me it was the end for Madden. Cuffed, and without a 'chute-pack, he wouldn't have a chance.

I dropped another two thousand. Mendez was laying in wait for the Jenny. With powerful glasses he'd pick up the pay-roll ship, and then climb into the air. I'd caught Madden in his room, just as he was preparing to go out and water my gas. That would have let me down somewhere out on the mesquite. And Madden, he was sick. When the boys got in, if they did get in, Madden would have been astonished at their news. And I'd have been out in the heat and sand, helpless. Oh, Madden had talked, all right. He wasn't the breed to bluff all the way through. My automatic had been a convincing argument.

My eyes were in the shadow of the slopes. We'd had a head-wind since the start, and after Madden's talk about watered gas—I'd checked up on it. It had all taken time. But the air was clear, so far as I could see.

The devil it was! Even as Madden shouted hoarsely through the mouthpiece of his head-set, I spotted the single-seater. She was zooming up out of the slope-shadows, and she was getting altitude fast. I swore, and started to climb, banking off to the east. There was one real fear now. Mendez had spotted the Jenny, through his glasses—would he get to the money ship before I did?

I'd been a fool to try and catch him on the ground, after that late start. I should have flown right to the meeting place. That was my job—protection. The routine of two years at Rook hadn't helped my thinking apparatus much.

"Shut up!" I snapped through the 'phones to Madden, who was doing a lot of scared talking that didn't count. "I'm flying this ship."

Then I saw the Jenny. She was high, around ten thousand. And she was already flying past the air-spot we'd decided on for our meeting. Tia Juana was to the north; she was sky-streaking with all her Jenny-speed, down the line of concessions. We were both cutting in on her; the Harmer boys must have sighted us. The single-seater was nearer, but we had the altitude.

Johnny was flying, I guessed, and he was climbing the J.N.4. She didn't have much of a ceiling, but every foot of altitude helped now. I was up around ten thousand; Mendez was coming in at seven, less than an eighth of a mile ahead of me. He had to bank a bit to get in the Jenny's path of flight—and I dove, letting go a short burst from both guns.

It didn't bother Mendez. He was climbing up under the tail-assembly angle of the Jenny. I held the D.H. in a mile dive and got my sights on the single-seater. He was within two hundred yards of the Jenny. I was twice the distance away from him. It looked bad.

And then the Jenny went up in a stall, fell off on a wing. She started to twist downward. I was almost within range of the single-seater. Johnny Harmer had pulled a tail-spin as a last resort!

It worked. The Jenny went down toward earth in a screaming-wired spin—the single-seater nosed over, let go a short burst—and missed. Then he pulled the little ship out of the dive, zoomed.

The zoom fooled me. I'd figured he'd go down after the Jenny, and that little ship came up fast. I squeezed the stick-trigger, and trailed lead out into the air. The little ship was above now. I banked, leveled off, zoomed. He came screaming down—for a split second he had me in a dead line. A strut shot splinters over the fuselage—instinctively I ducked my head.

Then I did a wing-over—and caught the single-seater coming over in what might have been a loop. It wasn't. One, long burst—and I had the fuselage and wings in my ring-sights—could see the plane quiver in the air.

I banked off, narrowly avoiding a crash, and when I came around the single-seater was going down in a tight spin!

We dove after her, and I saw the Jenny diving in from the distance. Johnny had pulled the money ship out of his spin, all right. The two of us came down for that finish. It was a screaming crash—and we were both better than two thousand feet up when the single-seater dug into the mesquite. A terrific roar, a spurt of white sand. Then red flame licking back from the engine, enveloping the whole plane.

I shut my eyes for a second, then glided, picking a landing place near the wrecked and burning ship. A strut on my port wing was ripped loose, and I humored the D.H., setting her down. The Jenny came down behind us; we struck, rolled forward to a stop. I jerked my head. Madden, his face deathly white, was shaking his head slowly from side to side.

"He—he almost got you! Almost got us!" he muttered weakly.

I nodded. "There are times," I managed slowly, "when almost is a sweet-sounding word. This is one of 'em.

"THE forty thousand?" I smiled grimly at the Harmer brothers. Madden sat propped up against the tail-assembly of the Jenny. "Madden can take us to the place. Small camp over by Maderia Pass. They were going to split, after Mendez had done some more business. Pedro? Madden says he doesn't know and I believe him. Chances are Mendez wanted him out of the way. Thought he might see something from the mesquite, and didn't know how long he'd be there. So he flew down, walked some distance, and got him. No plane tracks near that other Jenny, though."

Johnny Harmer nodded his head slowly. He jerked his oil-spattered helmet from his red hair.

"How come, Mac? What made you suspicious of Madden?"

I grinned. "Didn't like his looks," I stated. "Bullet holes and lead in the sand under and around your old J.N.4. Knew he was lying when he said he'd been shot in the air. Too good a landing. And his pal was too rotten a shot to suit me—when he tried to get Madden back there at the ranch house. But I almost muffed reaching you in time, Johnny."

Johnny grinned. "You did plenty, Mac," he stated. "Jake and me—we acted dumb. And it doesn't pay to act that way."

I thought of Mendez and that death-crash. And I thought of Madden. And of myself.

"Not south of Tia Juana, it doesn't pay to act dumb!" I muttered grimly. "We've got facts to prove that little thing."

Part Three

HUGH PENDEXTER'S

Story of the Dance Halls, the Saloons, the Bad Men of the Old West

Preceding events briefly retold

In the year 1867 Lee Darby, a veteran of the Confederate Army, comes to Cheyenne, intent upon making his fortune. The frontier is a scene of wild disorders due to the approach of the Union Pacific Railroad.

In this wildest of the roaring railroad towns Darby has fallen in with Fevernager, an old plainsman, and Baltimore his partner. The Indians had killed Baltimore's parents when he was an infant; and, adopting him, had raised him to manhood more Indian than white in mind and habit. Fevernager invites Darby to join him in the business of hunting buffalo to supply the railroad towns with meat. He hesitates, wishing to engage in something that will yield larger returns.

Darby also meets Allan Gorl, an Eastern capitalist who seeks adventure and new fortunes on the frontier. Darby feels that together he and Gorl could reap big profits. But Gorl, although a business genius, wastes his time and money in drinking and gambling. Gorl himself realizes that it is only his wealth that buys him immunity from the vicious elements of Cheyenne. Gorl consorts with Dollie, a Spanish dance-hall girl, and is amused at her conflicting impulses of affection and avarice.

Chief of the bad element of Cheyenne is Elder Keen, an apostate Mormon, shrewd and quiet, but the most deadly of gun-fighters. Among his satellites are Jack Hays, a noisy braggart, and Whisky Frank, a reputed killer. There is bad blood between Keen's killers, and Fevernager, Baltimore and Darby.

One evening as Gorl and Darby are entering a dance hall they hear a shot. Rushing in, they find that Whisky Frank has mortally wounded an old prospector named Strawberry Sam, who was so indiscreet as to display a fat pouch of gold. Keen had been attempting, without success, to worm out of Sam the location of his strike. Now, as Sam is dying he whispers to Darby, so that none of the killers can hear, the secret that will set the frontier afire, the secret that Darby is to carry to Fevernager, Sam's friend—that "The Black Hills are lousy with gold."

Darby eludes Keen and rides out onto the plains to Fevernager's camp. He gives Sam's last message to the old plainsman but neither he nor Baltimore are eager for gold. Nor will they assist Darby to find the rich strike, believing that a search for it will end in tragedy. So Darby reluctantly settles down to the business of killing and preparing buffalo for the market.

Darby becomes restless and rides into Cheyenne. He has a notion that he can persuade Gorl to organize a gold-seeking expedition to the Black Hills. His hopes are blasted when he meets the Spanish girl and hears that Elder Keen has taken Gorl off to his lair in the hills. The girl begs Darby to rescue Gorl. She fears that Keen will get him to sign away all his wealth, and then kill him. Darby consents to go.

Darby reaches Keen's lair, and knowing that the gun-fighter will never kill him while he holds Strawberry Sam's secret, boldly demands that Gorl be allowed to return in safety to Cheyenne.

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The Roaring TOWNS

Just as Keen is about to gain the upper hand in this tilt, a squad of soldiers from Fort Russell rides up, and Gorl and Darby are released.

By now Darby is disgusted with Gorl, and giving up all idea of hunting for gold with the Easterner, returns to Fevernager's camp. The next day the three men, Fevernager, Baltimore and Darby, ride into Cheyenne. Keen's men are there and they clash. Baltimore kills Whisky Frank as the badman is about to knife an innocent victim.

In the ensuing scrape Baltimore flees Cheyenne. When later Darby and Fevernager return to camp they find Baltimore waiting for them. He tells them of a dream he has just had in which the Thunder-Birds of the Indians have appeared and told him that he will kill a man who "would be painted red and standing in water." With that Baltimore rides away to seek out a band of Sioux among whom he may go through the *Heyoka kaga*, the Indian rite attendant upon such a dream. Darby and Fevernager ponder over the meaning of this strange dream and prepare to await the return of their young friend.

CHAPTER V

HEYOKA DAYS

ON THE third day after young Baltimore's departure Fevernager and Darby were surprised by the arrival of Allan Gorl. He was riding a bony sorrel and bringing a pack-mule heavily loaded. They were at work, making more tight the crude smoke-houses, when they first saw him. He waved a greeting and met them at the fire. As he slid to the ground and shook hands he answered the unasked question in Darby's mind by announcing:

"Dollie told me where to find you. She wanted me to come. Am I welcome, or will I be in the way?"

"Ye're welcome," assured Fevernager. "Going to raise a lodge and make new medicine?"

"I'm going to learn how to wear and use a gun," Gorl explained. "If you'll picket this beast, Darby, I'll unpack the mule."

With both animals grazing the two partners were interested in the packs. Fevernager's eyes glittered as he beheld a jug of whisky and Darby frowned. Both were interested in the three Colt forty-fours and the large amount of ammunition and a generous quantity of groceries and tinned foods.

"Reckon on having a big fight?" queried the plainsman.

"Just what has happened?" asked Darby.

"It's what may happen that drove me out here," replied Gorl, handing out cigars and seating himself before the fire. "My streak of luck turned the other night after you fellows quit town. Drank too much rum and woke up cleaned out. Dollie and the big Irishman came to me. Girl jawed a lot. Maybe she scared me a bit."

"Scared you? How's that?" puzzled Fevernager.

Gorl sprawled at ease on his new blankets and lazily explained, "It's like this. I'm about broke." He tried to smile but could not entirely eliminate the sober expression from his broad face, and his eyes had the look of a defenseless man who believes he stands in peril.

"Blue skies! You busted?" gasped the plainsman. "Never s'posed you could get through your pile any more'n I'd s'pose whisky could stop being made in Kansas!"

Gorl laughed mirthlessly and continued. "Well, it's almost all gone. All I worked thirty years to get together in the East, and what I made coming out with the railroad! Never planned to more than play at gambling. But rum always made me feel like doing big things. And I plunged."

"I've lost a season's beaver in a night of gambling in Pierre's Hole, under the Three Tetons," reminiscently remarked the plainsman, his gaze wandering backward over the dead years.

Darby probed deeper. "You're not scared of being poor," he prompted. "More chances to make money in Cheyenne than down here in this camp."

"It's Keen and his crowd," growled Gorl, his big face reddening with shame and anger. "I saw yesterday he was suspecting my flush days were over for the time being. He began talking as if I was one of his hangers-on. I went back at him. I had him guessing. But he did fumble with that damned umbrella quite a bit. It was after I lost my last chip at the table. He had lost the thousand I gave him and was in an ugly mood. Dollie heard about it some way. She and the Irishman came to the Dodge House and began throwing fits. She had learned from that young Baltimore where you folks were camping. She begged of me to come down here and pull myself together. Irishman talked the same. And here I am. If I'm in the way I'll pull out and do for myself. I've brought plenty of fancy grub and fixings."

"And the jug," mused Darby, scowling at the whisky.

"Nothing like that," quickly corrected Gorl. "Just a drink once in a while till I get my nerves steady. I don't dare get drunk. Afraid I'll wake up dead. Hays and the others are putting Keen up to act nasty."

"Stay here by all means. Keep the fires going while we're out hunting. You can play with your big guns all day long," said Darby.

"I'll keep the fires going," briskly assured Gorl, and he came to his feet and strode about. He visited the smoke-houses and made a mental inventory of the outfit. The partners watched him, saying nothing. Finally he came back to his blankets and curtly announced, "This business must be reorganized."

Darby turned his head to conceal a smile. Fevernager gaped at him and inquired, "What have we been doing wrong, Mister?"

Gorl stood with legs straddled apart, hands on hips and viciously chewed his cigar. He wrinkled his lips in contempt and swung his head from side to side to favor each with a glance, and added, "Small potatoes."

"They're mighty good tasting pertaters," sharply insisted Fevernager. "Don't look like you had any pertaters."

Gorl tried to straighten his rounded shoulders, and worked the cigar to a corner of his mouth, and curtly replied, "I'm no butcher. That part of the game is new to me. But finding, or creating markets is my business."

"Of all the damned uppity ways," began the plainsman explosively. But Darby clapped a hand on his shoulder and prompted:

"All right. Go on."

Gorl continued, "You've been doing a retail business in Cheyenne. You've made good wages. But there's no big money in it. Knowing what I might wish to do if I rode down here I had a talk with some of the U. P. people in town ahead of the rails to see about the bridge they'll be throwing across the creek. I made certain propositions. They were agreed to. I'll come in as a partner and put those propositions through, if you agree. I'd say at the start that if I wasn't pressed for ready cash I'd go in for raising beef. There's big money in raising cattle out here."

"For the Injuns to run off and eat," jeered Fevernager.

"The Indians can't stop the cattle industry any more than they stopped the stage-coaches, the freighting, and the railroad. Open your eyes, old man, and look ahead," impatiently retorted Gorl. "The Indians are booked for government reservations. This country goes to those who can develop it."

"But you lack ready cash and you've got something in mind besides cattle raising," reminded Darby. "Money in what we're doing?"

"Correct. If I come in with you this is what we will do. Stop peddling meat to eating-houses and branch out and sell fresh meat in large amounts to one place and—"

"Pilgrim talk!" scoffed the plainsman. "How can you keep meat from sp'iling in big amounts when the town won't buy only so much?"

"Don't run until you've heard, neighbor," bruskly advised Gorl. "I'm trying to tell you. It's my business to find a big market. I've found it. The U. P. will put in an eating-house when it reaches the town. It will have a string of eating-houses from coast to coast. The eating-houses alone will take all the game we can deliver in Cheyenne. Once the road has passed beyond Cheyenne the superintendent of the eating-houses will ship it up and down the line. We'll have to shift the camp farther back into the hills where we can get white and black-tail deer. We hire hunters to bring in mountain sheep. It'll be up to the railroad to keep the meat from spoiling; which they can do by shipping it in iced cars. We won't have to smoke much, if any, meat. We must get a better price for the hides. I have the details all worked out in my mind. But that's not all."

"Gorl, if you can put that through you're a wonder!" cried Darby.

"It's put through as soon as the rails reach Cheyenne in the middle of November," impatiently said Gorl. "I've spoke of something else. It's this. Easterners will come here to invest Eastern capital. They'll come in droves. I know the breed." He paused and laughed harshly and interpolated, "Ought to know them. I was one of them. Here is where we cash in: every Easterner will be a missionary for us. We'll feed them to game dinners. We'll make game dinners popular in the cities. We'll ship game, iced, to New York and other Eastern points. We ought to have San Francisco among our customers. For that trade we'll receive fancy prices. I want to clean up ten or fifteen thousand as my share; then I'll turn it over to you and get into something bigger."

"You don't mean that much as a third?" incredulously asked Darby.

"Think I'm keeping cases for what 'sleepers' I can pick up? That much for me, or it isn't worth bothering with. Of course you two men can't shoot all the game we'll need. We'll have to have several camps with you and Baltimore looking after the hunters and seeing the meat gets to town on schedule. . . . By the way, where is the young fellow?"

"Gone away to make a new medicine. Had a powerful dream. He must git ready to kill a man painted red and standing in water," explained Fevernager.

Gorl's eyes opened widely. He exploded, "There's no ten thousand dollars, nor ten dollars in this, for me if such crazy notions get mixed up in business."

"Crazy? To take warnings sent him in dreams? What are you talking about?" angrily cried the plainsman.

DARBY lifted a hand to quiet them and said, "Baltimore is a partner. He will do his share. He's away for a while. He thinks along different lines from what you and I think. I'm keen for your plan. It's the first hopeful chance I've had of making any real money. But Fevernager and Baltimore started this business. Till Baltimore returns his fourth must be set aside for him."

"That isn't business," remonstrated Gorl.

"Wait a bit. I threw in with them and I stick with them," said Darby. "You can take your plan to others and we'll worry along as we are. If you come in with us you'll have to take the game as you find it."

"All right," agreed Gorl. "Four of us in it. But inside of a month you two will have to be looking about for hunters and do some rare hustling. Folks eat three times a day. If we don't keep the meat moving someone else will. I happen to have friends among the U. P. people, and have the inside. . . . There's lots of tinned stuff in the packs to vary the monotony of meat. It's common property."

Fevernager eyed him curiously and with a new respect growing inside his sceptical old head. "Any more tricks up your sleeve, partner?" he gently asked.

"Yes, sir!" snapped Gorl. "A fine trick if I was free to develop it."

"Why aren't you free?" asked Darby.

"That—faded umbrella that Keen carries. And his trick of shoving his long hand inside of it so as to grab the gun strapped in the holster along the handle. Now, I'm going to take up shooting."

Both men wondered what the other "trick" might be, but each had been schooled in minding his own business and leaving another's severely alone. The more Darby pondered over Gorl's plan for selling large quantities of game the more enthusiastic he grew. He wondered why he had not thought of some such scheme, instead of accepting the business on the simple plane his two friends had established it. But there was no jealousy in his heart. He always had entertained a high respect for Gorl's business astuteness. He could discover no weak spots in the new partnership, provided Gorl kept sober. The chance to supply the Union Pacific eating-houses with game should quickly realize a small fortune for each partner. If he could make ten thousand for his own share he would be satisfied, and would return to Louisiana and cease his worries.

He told Gorl, "If you're bound to shoot let me give you some points. It's about the only thing I'm rather good in. We'll walk to the creek and be careful not to send any lead near the horses."

"Those skunks must respect me because of my guns," insisted Gorl as he opened a box of ammunition. "They're all cowards if they know a man will and can fight it out with them."

Fevernager put the supplies under canvas and was content to remain by the fire, brooding over the past greatness of the country and finding nothing of betterment in the rapid changes wrought within the last few years. He scarcely was conscious of the detonations of the heavy guns down at the creek. In disgust he was ruminating aloud, "Cattle ranches! Pretty idee! Tame cattle can't do nothing out here. Only buffaler's got sense enough to live in this country. But tame cattle! Well, we'll hope it's the only weak spot in his make-up."

In the meantime Darby was insisting, "You must get used to holding a gun in your hand first. You can't match those villains on the draw. They've been doing that ever since they could hold a gun. None would give you an even show in going for a gun."

"I'll learn the whole lesson in a piece," said Gorl.

"I'll stick up a line of targets and you bang away at them. You can practice drawing a gun while feeding the fires. The thing now to do is to get used to the bang of a gun that's fired by your own hand."

"I'm going to practice throwing a knife. I always felt I'd like a knife better," said Gorl.

Darby suppressed a smile. "You can practice that too," he encouraged, "while Fevernager and I are out hunting. Lots of time. I never got much out of a knife, and I'm more scared of one than I am of a gun. Now I'll show you how I should shoot at those three sticks." And drawing a weapon he fired three times in rapid succession and scored each shot.

"I never can do that!" ruefully said Gorl.

"Then shoot at one stick till you score," encouraged Darby as he reloaded the empty chambers and replaced his revolver.

No hunting was done the next day as the smoke-houses were filled and there were hides to be cleaned. Gorl shot off much ammunition down at the creek. Late in the afternoon, while Fevernager was preparing supper, Darby made two discoveries: Gorl was an excellent shot with a rifle, heritage of boyhood hunting trips in New England woods, and he did have a natural knack of throwing a knife. The latter gift caused Darby much surprise and prompted an inquiry.

"Used to practice throwing a hatchet at a barndoor. That led to throwing a knife. Made believe the hatchet was an Indian tomahawk. Got so I could make it stick handle up, or down, just as I wished," explained Gorl, a bit proud of his ability. "After I'd fooled with a knife I decided it was easier than the hatchet."

"Quit the guns and carry a hatchet, or a knife in your belt," advised Darby.

Gorl was stubborn. The same quality that had made him succeed in Rhode Island was now turning him to conquer the forty-fours. He could shoot with both hands without the explosions causing him to jump, and occasionally he was rewarded by accidentally hitting one of the three targets.

Gorl kept away from the whisky, much to Fevernager's approval. The latter, however, drank generously and insisted on singing the "Travel Song" of the Kiowas. He went to bed genially drunk. Gorl took a night-cap and shook the jug and remarked:

"He's a good one to have around if a man wants to quit drinking."

With Fevernager snoring and the fire banked for the night, Darby remarked, "That big Irishman with the spike-maul. You say he came with the Spanish girl to see you?"

"He means well, but he's too noisy and nosey," sleepily grumbled Gorl. "I didn't come West to get married."

IT WAS near the end of October and November was almost ready to take charge of the plains and mountains. The nights grew colder. Darby had taken several loads of smoked and fresh meat to Cheyenne without incident. As he timed his trips to enter the town during the forenoon, and to depart before sundown, he saw nothing of Elder Keen and his followers. He observed that Gorl was morose when the wagon pulled out for town and was keenly interested to hear the news. The fact that General Stevenson was about to finish a stone fire-proof storehouse, to be run by I. W. French & Company for freighting and forwarding did not interest the Easterner. On his return from the second trip Darby surmised Gorl's eagerness for news was prompted largely by a desire to hear something about the Spanish girl. On the third trip he told Darby:

"Do an errand for me. See Dollie and tell her I'm getting along fine and preparing to make lots of money."

As a result Darby was questioned closely for half an hour, in the presence of Mrs. Dolin. He was surprised to find the girl more concerned about Gorl's habits than the plans for retrieving his fortune. She seemed much pleased to have Darby assure her the old plainsman had consumed the whisky and that Gorl was temperate.

"Tell him from me, my friend, that Elder Keen sent a man here to learn where he went and that Señor Dolin make him understan' he must not come again. Tell him my heart is glad he stops drinking."

Darby delivered the message. Gorl made no comment and doggedly stuck to his revolver practice. When the men were in camp he devoted his time to shooting at targets and no longer showed elation when he registered a hit. While alone in camp he practiced steadily on drawing his guns. From morning until night he wore two of the big weapons so he might be used to their sagging weight. One day he asked Fevernager watch him throw the knife and won the old plainsman's admiration by his exhibition. One evening he worried both men by announcing:

"I'm going along with you tomorrow, Darby. I've been thinking over that other line of business I hinted at my first day here. I think I'll develop it on the side. It won't interfere with our plans."

"But Keen and his crowd?" reminded Darby. "You said you'd given it up, whatever it may be, because of them."

"I feel quite confident now. It won't take long and I've decided they won't bother me. My nerves were shaken a bit when I came down here."

"Just what kind of business is it, *Kola?*" asked Fevernager curiously. "Gitting drunk? Then I'll go along and help. I ain't had a rare since the jug give out."

"Real estate," snapped Gorl.

"Rather late to get into that without considerable money," warned Darby. "A good lot now will cost from twenty-five hundred to thirty-five hundred dollars."

Gorl grinned broadly and slapped his knee and suddenly decided, "No reason why you two shouldn't profit."

"We have no money," said Darby.

"Don't need any. That's the beauty of it. I'll put my cards on the table, face up. Just before coming down here I discovered that no plot of the town has ever been filed in any office, nor has any official notice ever been given of such a townsite on the public lands."

"But the railroad sold the land," insisted Darby.

"Yes; but just what land? The town-site was surveyed, but no government survey has been made. That leaves a cloud on the titles of land already improved. The railroad, of course, intends to claim the odd-numbered sections after a government survey has cut the public lands up into sections. But Congress hasn't even established the officer of a surveyor-general. It may be several years before the survey is made.* What's to hinder me, or you, or anyone pre-empting other sections, so long as no filing has been made, no government survey made? I hold the town-sites along the road are all shot to hell if anyone wants to pre-empt. You two can come in with me on the deal."

"No," Darby refused. "It may be legal, but it doesn't sound to be clean-cut. I'll keep along with this work."

"Do as you like, but I'm going after some of that land. Plenty others will be after it, if they haven't already started."

"Squatters!" said Darby.

"That if you like. But we'll be squatters who will stick. We're bound to make good. Big crowd coming from Julesburg. Some will act rough and lose out. I'll walk soft and easy and keep within my legal rights."

"Doggone! Don't sound right," muttered Fevernager. "Don't sound just. Don't sound like there's anything fair about it. Sounds to me like a bodacious lot of trouble."

Darby was disconsolately concerned by another angle of the situation. He complained, "Whether you win or lose in this new scheme it means you'll not go through with your plan for selling meat to the eating-houses."

"It'll interfere in no way with our business. I'm not going to farm the land; or build on it. I'm just going to hold it till I can sell for a profit."

When the three men rode into Cheyenne on the last day of October the town was claiming a population of seven thousand. With the railhead so near a small army of workers had reached the creek, some to continue in the employ of the road by throwing a bridge across the stream, more to abandon themselves to riotous living. The many parasites accompanying the builders were now hurrying forward to take up winter quarters. As a result of this influx ahead of the graders there was an increase in lawlessness. Decent citizens were at odds as to just what was best to do. They must either mark time till Judge Whitehead, elected to the Dakota legislature, could succeed in having Laramie County formed, with Cheyenne for the county seat, and added to the territory's second judicial district and entitled to a court, or else enforce order by drastic and unofficial methods. Those who favored the latter mode of procedure argued it would be at the least six months before the legal machinery could function. In the interim, insisted this faction, a vigilance committee should be added to the People's court. The People's court had adopted the statutes of Colorado in settling disputes, but in criminal cases it was not a sufficient deterrent, complained many. Those who would wait for the county to be organized persisted in marking time, and all the while the vicious element was growing more bold and insolent.

The criminal element was greatly in the minority; and honest men, who had learned their lesson in mining-camps, realized that an honest man behind a six-shooter had a vast moral advantage over the cowardly killer likewise armed. Those who were unused to lynch law preached respect for the law when there was no law, and advised waiting at least until conditions became unbearable.

The three partners were quick to gather the views of both decent factions, as the talk was spread on the streets and in the various places of business. They also learned other bits of news of varying interest. Fevernager was greedily pleased to listen to an account of John Hardy's victory over Enoch Winters in a thirty-minute prize fight a mile and half out of town. His friends appreciated the importance of the *Daily Argus*, edited by County Treasurer Lucien L. Bedell, and the completion of the telegraph line from Cheyenne to Laporte, Colorado. There was considerable gossip and much excitement over the report that a large number of squatters were coming from Julesburg to take up land.

It also was apparent that many of the newcomers must pass the winter in dugouts, tents, and sod houses. Resorts for drinking and gambling and vice also had increased and must be housed during the white months under canvas. Shootings and robberies were on the increase and stressed the need of drastic measures once the line was completed to the creek.

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* Finished in 1870.

ANOTHER topic arousing general discussion, one entirely apart from local conditions, was the gold strike at the heads of the Sweetwater. This was avidly talked over in homes, stores, eating-places and dives. Railway officials worried lest the news might stampede their workers. The value of the find was highly exaggerated, yet gold had been discovered. The prospectors were the men who located the Cariso lode and developed a settlement at South Pass. Some seven hundred people were living in South Pass City on Willow Creek, and fifteen thousand dollars had been taken from the Cariso lode by crushing the ore in hand-mortars. This was a meager find compared with the rich strikes in the northern gold fields, but was accepted as being indicative of vast wealth. Men in Cheyenne talked about the Atlantic ledge, six miles north of Cariso. Besides South Pass City there were several mining districts, each boasting of a hundred or more population. Had the news reached Cheyenne earlier in the season many would not have waited for the railroad to arrive.

With Colorado on the south and Montana and Idaho on the north giving up immense treasure in gold it was entirely logical to assume that this section of Dakota territory abounded in similar riches. Because the population was supplied by the railroad and was itinerant the usual crop of frontier traditions had not taken root. Yet it was generally, if vaguely believed, that gold in abundance awaited the daring in this newly opened country. Stories were told of Captain W. F. Raynolds' expedition in 'fifty-nine and 'sixty finding gold in the Big Horn Mountains, with the discoverer forbidden to reveal the truth lest the escort of soldiers desert. It was also known that a company of prospectors left Bannack City in 'sixty-three to explore the Yellowstone country. Later four companies from Idaho investigated the Wind River gold-rumors and travelled some sixteen hundred miles without results. Fevernager, like all of his class, could talk for hours about the different rich deposits which they claimed to have stumbled upon. Such stories almost invariably had no foundation of fact. Western gold fields were not discovered by the old time trappers and traders.

Gorl parted from his friends as soon as they entered the town, saying he was going to call on the Spanish girl. He promised to meet his friends at the New Idea saloon at eight o'clock. Darby and the plainsman delivered the hides and soon sold all their meat. They could have sold much more, so great was the demand due to the sudden increase in population.

"Gorl was right," said Darby. "We'll need lots of hunters to keep up the supply. Working alone we couldn't begin to bring enough meat just for the eating-houses on this creek. And when all the railroad workers camp down here for the winter prices ought to be up to the roof."

Fevernager was not in the mood to bother with business. He announced his intention of reducing the liquor supply, and Darby went with him to keep him out of trouble. They took a table in the New Idea, and promptly on the hour Gorl entered, accompanied by Elder Keen.

Darby was disturbed. He was also annoyed to observe the high color in the Easterner's broad face. For the first time, except for the days spent in Little Crow creek, Gorl was wearing a belt in which were a gun and a big knife. Keen walked behind him, carrying his faded umbrella before him like a staff. As they came up to the table Darby stared questioningly at Keen. The old plainsman pushed back his battered felt hat and grinned wolfishly at the apostate and under his breath mumbled a scalp-song of the Chippewa, which, translated, would have announced, 'The women are enjoying it with us."

Darby motioned for the men to be seated. Keen hesitated, sensing hostility. Gorl dropped on a stool and directed, "Be seated, Elder." Then he explained to his companions, "Boys, I find the Elder has the same notion I have about taking up land. Big gang from Julesburg will grab land to-morrow. Many of them are in town now. There may be a fight. The Elder and I have buried our differences and with the help of his friends we'll hold our land against the Julesburgers."

"'Our land'," repeated Darby impatiently. "What claim have you to any land in Cheyenne until you buy it? I was hoping you had forgotten that idea."

Gorl's face reddened more deeply. "When I'm hunting a profit I never forget, or quit," he sententiously announced.

Fevernager chuckled at some amusing thought, and drawled, "How do you know that the Elder, here, won't take your land from you, jumping where you've jumped? And that after you've held it ag'in the Julesburgers and the notions of folks in town?"

Before Gorl could reply Keen was tapping his umbrella on the floor, and explaining. "You're too suspicious, old man. Gorl and I have had differences, but we're no worse friends for that. I never cheat a friend. If I was low down enough to try such a game on him he'd call in his friends. I'd have to call in mine. Some people would get killed. Neither him nor me would get anything. Then again the town is getting so high-toned it might hang the survivors. I never was an angel. I never was a fool. I'm after something solid. Conditions out in this country are changing fast. I'm getting older. I'm after something solid. I'm after land. I'm obliged to Gorl for explaining about the land-situation here. There's land aplenty for all of us."

Gorl added, "Plan won't work out unless there's quite a few of us in it. Not too late for you and Fevernager to throw in with us."

Darby shook his head, and prophesied, "You will make nothing out of this land-scheme."

Keen quickly insisted, "All to gain. Nothing to lose. If we don't win out we'll go after gold next spring. Gorl will organize an expedition. I'll supply the fighting men to stand off Injuns. If you won't throw in on land, throw in on gold, Darby. What happened up in the hills is past and forgotten. I was drunk. It was a matter between Gorl and me, and he don't hold any grudge."

"It's certainly none of my affair, Elder . . . now," politely agreed Darby. "What I'll do in the spring couldn't be promised now. Have a drink?"

Keen surprised him by saying, "I think we've had enough to drink. We'll need clear heads to-morrow. Times are changing. I have ears. I've told the boys they must be less playful."

"Meaning you've turned into a man of peace?" asked the plainsman, his old eyes lighting with the hope the question would be resented.

But the Elder was not to be baited. His long face lost nothing of its solemn expression as he slowly bowed his head. But Fevernager had reached a point in his liquor where he craved excitement. Laughing derisively he remarked, "I'll bet a wolf's scalp you won't go fussing 'round South Pass when you start hunting for gold."

"Why? If I think gold's there," snapped the Elder, his eyes beginning to smolder.

"Too many Mormons flocking there," answered Fevernager with a dry chuckle.

Incensed at his friend, but with his eyes on Keen, Darby watched. Keen's effort to restrain his terrible temper was obvious. Half a minute passed before he conquered. His voice was low and gentle as he replied:

"You are right in thinking I am no longer a Mormon, friend. My life isn't safe in the Great Salt Lake basin, I fear. Nor will I go where Mormons are gathering. However, I'll not be losing anything so far as South Pass goes. No great amount of gold will be found there. Some? Yes. But no fortunes. The young man who escaped from the Indians knows the true treasure house. Where is he?"

"Gone back to visit 'em and to make a strong medicine."

"If he would only be frank with us! If he only would talk!" sighed the Elder. "Such a cruel waste to leave it in the ground."

"Darby'n me have a prime gold secret," reminded Fevernager with a sly grin.

"I was misjudged in Strawberry Sam's death. I'd rather killed Whisky Frank than have poor Sam done for."

"I believe you, Elder," promptly assured Darby.

Fevernager's mood shifted to one of much bitterness. He complained, "I always figured I'd do for that skunk of a Frank. But Baltimore got ahead of me."

"I am glad the man is dead. A fool and a blunderer," said Keen.

Gorl fidgeted impatiently, and broke in, "Let's not waste time on him. See here, Darby, why not share your secret with us? I'm your partner in one enterprise, why not a partner in another?"

Darby evasively replied, "If we knew the exact location, which we don't, I wouldn't give the news to the world. If

I make a try for the gold in the spring that will be time enough for Fevernager and me to decide who goes along with us. Each man will be carefully picked; for at the best it may be death to some who go. I want gold as much as you do, but I haven't yet decided to try for it."

Keen rested his hands on the umbrella handle and stared hungrily at the speaker. Relaxing a bit he remarked, "A small band, each man true and tried, will be better than a big band. If you decide to try for it, friend Darby, simply remember that I am a host in meeting trouble. If you pick me to go along and take none of the other boys I should be thoroughly satisfied. Gorl, let's have a bite to eat."

"We've eaten, or we'd join you," said Darby.

Keen continued, "I'm mighty well pleased to see Gorl looking in such fine fettle. I've told him if he will be moderate with liquor there's nothing he can't accomplish out here. The old ways are slipping away fast. I'm past middle-age. I hanker for a modest little pile and a ranch. Cattle is the business to get into."

"You hit the nail on the head, Elder," loudly endorsed Gorl. "And just as I told you, Darby. A fortune in the cattle industry. If you fellows won't eat, Keen and I will.

"We'll keep you company," said Darby, who feared to allow the Easterner to get out of sight.

FOOD was brought for the two and the talk was confined to commonplaces. Darby realized Keen was anxious to establish himself as a respectable character, perhaps in the hope it would result in his being allowed to share in Strawberry Sam's secret. Darby was pleased to have him attack the rôle if only for the sake of Gorl. He was annoyed by Fevernager's waggishness, as the plainsman's drinks put a sting in nearly every remark he directed at Keen. At times the latter had difficulty in holding himself in check but the supper was finished with all outward appearances of harmony. As the four rose from the table Darby asked:

"Traveling around with us, Gorl?"

"If you'll go with us while we lay our plans for the morrow."

"We don't want any land. We own everything east of the Big Muddy. We'll run across your trail later during the night."

"I'd love to have you two keep us company," assured the Elder.

"We'll foller our own trail," insisted Fevernager. "And don't let your little finger ride your thumb, Gorl. There ain't more'n enough liquor to satisfy me."

"You're the one who will need a keeper," Gorl shortly told him.

Darby was inclined to believe the Easterner was right once they had parted at the door. The plainsman's idea of "fun" was to start a row in every place they visited. Darby's temper was set on a hair-trigger by the time he had prevented three fights. It did no good to abuse Fevernager. He accepted the most bitter upbraidings as a joke. Nor could he be induced to retire for the night. And all the time Darby was fending off trouble from the plainsman he was worrying about Gorl. It angered him to realize that he could not go to bed without learning the whereabouts and condition of the Easterner. He finally decided it best to utilize the plainsman's lust for liquor by making a search of the many dives. He shortened the stay in each once he learned Gorl was not present. By midnight the plainsman was truculent beyond bearing.

Darby seized him by the shoulders and bitterly said, "You're beastly drunk and don't understand what I'm saying. But I'm through with you. You're drunk. What's worse you're a damn fool. I'll not throw in with such."

This vehemence, to Darby's surprise, registered on the old man's befuddled mind. He remonstrated, "Just 'cause I'm talking like a chief don't mean I've lost my head. I'll be quiet as a little lamb, son. But if any he-hellion steps on my toes—"

"That's the trouble with you," despaired Darby. "You can't enjoy your liquor unless you get into a fight."

"Carried liquor high as my lungs 'fore you was born. Toted it under my belt to the Oregon 'n' Californy country when there wa'nt nothing out here but Injuns 'n' bad weather. Now we'll hunt up your fool friend and I'll be on hand to take care of *you!*"

Having assumed the rôle of protector the plainsman's mood became pretergrave. The search for Gorl was continued, and the first place they entered after leaving the Beauvais House revealed their man. Darby was surprised and delighted to observe Gorl was sober. He was standing by himself at one end of the bar with a glass of beer before him. He was carelessly watching a group of heavily armed men twenty feet down the bar who were drinking heavily and talking loudly. Elder Keen was seated at a small table, the umbrella lying across it; none of his followers was there.

Darby nodded to Gorl and induced Fevernager to sit at a table by the wall. One of the group at the bar loudly announced, "Talked about this burg being tough! That's simon-pure craziness. Julesburg was the 'riginal Hell on Wheels. When we didn't have a couple of killings a day we thought it was Sunday. When one died without his boots on it was talked about for a week. We had ten dance-halls going day 'n' night. This burg's asleep. We've come to wake her up." He paused to stare resentfully at Gorl's well groomed figure, and spat for emphasis, and resumed:

"No damned calico-seller from the States is going to tell me I lie. By—! I'd like to hear him say that! Lie, eh? So I'm a liar." And he swept his wolfish gaze from the grinning countenances of his friends to rest malevolently on Gorl. It was the old game of a badman baiting a pilgrim into a show of resentment. Gorl slowly raised his glass and sipped his beer.

"You was at Sand Creek, John. You didn't stand no fooling there," encouraged a friend. "I see the scalps you fetched back. You was at Julesburg when it was a real town. You didn't stand no fooling there. I don't see how anyone can s'pose you'll stand any fooling here."

Elder Keen coughed gently and jerked his head for Gorl to join him. Instead of doing so the Easterner slowly shifted his position until the end of the bar served as a breastwork. The big, broad face changed none in expression. He did not appear to have heard the ranting talk, or to have sensed the presence of the Julesburg bullies.

Fevernager was very quiet, but grinned expectantly as he watched the war. Under cover of the table Darby drew a gun. He feared there was to be trouble.

The boaster faced Gorl and told him, "I never stood for no fooling all my life. It's ag'in my natur'. I'm two yards wide 'n' all wool. The Bitter Creek slope is sunshine 'n' honey along side of me when I'm riled."

"Lawd! What talk!" hoarsely whispered the plainsman to Darby as he kept his admiring gaze on the speaker.

"He means trouble," murmured Darby.

"Bah! Just filled with words an' strong liquor, or I'd go out there 'n' comb him. May yet after he's done talkin'." And the plainsman settled back to be further delectated.

DARBY was not convinced it was empty boasting. Yet Elder Keen did not appear to be taking it seriously. As for Gorl he continued sipping his beer and showed no concern.

His continued indifference infuriated the bully. He stepped back from the bar and hooked his thumbs in his belt and rocked back and forth on his heels and bitterly complained:

"Be I to be put upon in the face of my friends? Is a creetur', just because he wears storeclothes, going to put upon John Bringer, who stood for no foolishness at Sand Creek, who stood for no foolishness in old Julesburg? Stranger, you've gone too far."

He waited for the rhetorical effect to sink in. Fevernager chuckled and whispered, "Trying to find a easy place to back-down in. When he quits I'm going to ruffle his hair." Darby scarcely heard him, so intent was he on watching for a hostile move. Elder Keen, sitting stiffly erect, clasped his long bony hands on the umbrella handle. Gorl sipped his beer and stared vacantly down the bar.

The bully slowly turned to his friends. Darby relaxed and sighed in relief. Gorl had outbluffed him by doing and saying nothing. But Bringer had suspected some of Gorl's friends were at the tables. He sharply commanded:

"Keep me covered while I cut the pilgrim's comb!"

Instantly five men faced about, their hands on their guns. Secured, as he believed from any interruption, Bringer spun about to face Gorl and shouted, "You'll draw on me, will you?" And he started to draw his weapon.

The onlookers blinked in amazement as Gorl's hand jerked up and hurled a bowie-knife at the bully. In the space of a second, and while the bully's gun was barely clear of the belt, the knife had been thrown to stab through the biceps of the left arm. With a scream of pain the bully grabbed at the knife and half doubled over. Gorl was watching him closely.

The man who had reminded Bringer of his reluctance to endure any "fooling", roared furiously and took his friend's place and brought a gun down to bear on the Easterner. The end of the umbrella on the table before Elder Keen spit fire with a *bang*. The heavy bullet caught the would-be murderer in the right side and ended its journey in the bar. Shot through, the Julesburg man remained erect for an instant, his gaze stupidly fixed on Gorl's broad face. Then the hinges of his knees closed and without a sound he collapsed at the feet of his fellows.

His slayer coughed as if clearing his throat, and announced, "I am Elder Keen. I hope no one will bother my friend while he is finishing his beer."

That the name was known was shown by the startled fear leaping into faces of the Julesburg delegation. The wounded man forgot to groan as he beheld his friend dead on the floor. He scarcely winced as another friend yanked the knife from the wound.

Darby could not resist a thrill of admiration for the apostate Mormon. He was a brute and a killer. But he was thorough. That he was deadly was evidenced by the corpse, and even more so by the dread in each bewhiskered face. The wounded man screamed:

"For God's sake! No more, Elder Keen. Don't shoot ag'in! It was only play. Call it quits."

"Never knew he was your friend," squealed another.

Elder Keen indulged in a slow smile. Then he was sternly ordering, "Get out! Take *that* along with you. Bartender, the trouble is over. You may fetch me a drink. Drinks for these other two gentlemen. Will you join us, Gorl?"

Gorl had not uttered a word during the tragic scene. As he left the bar and walked to Keen's table he was, outwardly, as composed as ever. But after he had seated himself he betrayed his pent up emotion by hoarsely muttering;

"I nailed him! Always knew the knife was my weapon!"

"Well and quickly cast. But you can shoot only once with a knife," said Keen as he rose and stalked after the men carrying the dead man from the room. He waited to make sure none had lingered to try a shot through a window. He stepped outside to watch them slowly retreating.

Darby told Gorl, "Keen was a better friend to you tonight than I, or Fevernager. I had drawn my gun, but it was over before I could chip in."

"Never looked for that sort of work," bitterly complained the plainsman. "Never looked for any action. Then come that knife. Reckoned that had finished the fun. Set me to laughing. Then the fool at the bar chipped in for the Elder to finish. But you can bank on this, Gorl: he wouldn't any more'n potted you before he was giving his name to the devil."

Gorl started to drink some whisky, but suddenly put down the glass and huskily whispered, "I'm going to bed. Feel sick. What a damn fool to get in a position where a dog can kill you!"

CHAPTER VI

SQUATTERS AND NUGGETS

ALTHOUGH forewarned the citizenry of Cheyenne was not organized to resist the land-grabbers. Julesburg was emptying itself into Cheyenne. The transition from its "roaring" activities during the winter of 1866-7 to the now wholesale desertion would require another three months to be completed. Then a prairie station and unidentified graves only would mark its wickedness and former importance. The exodus to Cheyenne contained many stout wagons, loaded with dismantled shelters of wood and tents.

Sunrise, with the low-lying haze carpeting the prairie and causing the illusion of an illimitable sea rather than grass-lands, revealed the squatters' activities. Tents were up and more substantial material, hauled for nearly a hundred and fifty miles from Julesburg, was being erected in the shapes of houses. On each squatter's claim were men armed with shotguns, or revolvers, or both. Strangers to the town, arriving or leaving on the Wells, Fargo stage-coaches, might have been excused for thinking an armed force had come to besiege Crow Creek that morning. Some squatters, lacking material, had helped themselves to railroad ties stacked along the creek.

Mike Dolin, his loyalty to the Union Pacific strong, fared forth with his spike-maul and accosted three long-haired men loading a cart, and roared, "What do ye mean a-taking thim U. P. ties? Don't ye know they cost most three dollars apiece to git 'em here. Dump that load, ye scuts!"

One of the men drew a Navy revolver and quietly ordered, "Scoot!"

Dolin stared at the gun, then glanced down at the maul, and replied, "If ye feel that way about it I will."

The boldness of the squatters and their repeated asservations that all town titles were clouded, plus the readiness of the roughs to reap where they had not sown, caused the unorganized citizenry to hesitate and be contented with expostulations and warnings. An indignation meeting was held at City Hall, Sheriff Sweeney was urged to oust the intruders, making use of the town-marshal. Sweeney replied:

"I'll try, but I must have more deputies. And I want men whose land has been taken to go with me and say, 'This is my land.' I really believe those fellows will make a fight before giving up."

"They be stealing U. P. ties!" loudly complained Dolin.

"That's for the U. P. to worry about," said a citizen. "They're stealing land. That's what's the matter."

"Now is the time we could use a vigilance committee," sighed Morton Post, who ran a store at Ferguson and 17th Street.

In the back room of Tim Dyer's saloon Elder Keen was preparing to seize vacant lots inside the town. Gorl opposed, and insisted they should locate well outside the built-up portion of town; and to leave those who had encroached too closely to the business section to bear the brunt of municipal wrath.

Gorl was actuated by the belief he had the legal right to take up land so long as the titles were clouded. Although he was wearing two guns and a knife he had no desire for trouble. His vision was broad enough to perceive that no land taken by force could be held without resistance to similar claimants. Keen reluctantly accepted the Easterner's view-point, and simply because Gorl's status as a business man might be beneficial. They set forth, followed by some of Keen's friends, and proceeded to the open country and scattered then to stake their predatory claims.

Gorl and Keen kept together; and after they had driven their stakes Keen displayed a new brand of acquisitiveness. Carrying his umbrella over his left arm as a hunter might carry his rifle he stalked toward three men busily erecting a tent. Gorl called after him to inquire his purpose.

"Just getting acquainted with our new neighbors," he answered. Gorl was suspicious and fearful and slowly followed him, but keeping well back.

As Keen settled his stovepipe more firm and lengthened his stride one of the men hurried toward him, and warned:

"That's far enough! You're on our land. We don't want no callers."

Keen halted and thrust his right hand deeper inside the umbrella, and harshly demanded, "What do you rascals mean, coming here from a dead town, and pitching a tent on this lot?"

The other two men ceased work and quickly ranged along beside their companion. One of these held an ax. Keen glared at them for nearly a minute; then stridently ordered, "Get off this land, damn you! You're trespassing."

The man with the ax laughed boisterously and advised, "Trot along, Deacon, before someone hurts you."

"Damn you! Clear out!" ordered Keen.

"Come back here, Elder," cried Gorl.

"He's an elder, not a deacon, Jo," laughed the man with the ax.

The man Keen had first accosted, announced, "These Crow-Creekers might as well l'arn their lesson now as any time."

As he finished he suddenly grabbed for a gun. Before he could snatch it clear of the holster Keen had whipped his weapon from inside the old umbrella and fired from the hip.

"Good God!" Gorl exclaimed in horror.

The victim staggered as if hit by a heavy blow and plunged forward like an upset log.

Cocking the revolver, the *click-click* sounding staccato in the silence, Keen quietly asked, "Now will you two clear out, or must I send you both to hell?"

"We'll go!" frantically cried the man with the ax. "Don't shoot again!" He turned and ran toward the tent, looking back over his shoulder in great fear. His companion remained for a moment, staring wild-eyed at the prostrate figure face down in the dead grass: then he slowly rejoined his companion. As the two began taking down the tent Keen strode forward, commanding:

"Leave that! Improvements go with the land. Throw that fool into your cart and get out."

"Meaning we can't take our property?" asked the man with the ax.

"You have no property here; only this fool of a dead man. I'm getting impatient."

The two forthwith harnessed their two horses to the cart and drove down to the dead man and placed the body in the cart and departed at a mad gallop.

Nauseated by the cold-blooded murder Gorl faintly upbraided, "Why did you do that? I never dreamed of any bloody work like this."

"Shut up! No one's blaming you," Keen harshly replied as he proceeded to inventory the contents of the tent.

"Keen, don't tell me to shut up," hoarsely warned Gorl, his big frame suddenly quivering with rage.

Keen eyed him gloomily for a bit, then smiled grimly and thrust his gun back inside the umbrella. "We mustn't quarrel," he muttered. "You are excited, and I was feeling very angry at those three rascals. I recognized them as tough ones. I knew they'd jump us if we didn't jump them. Besides, I'm hoping to use that tent."

"It's robbery!" passionately insisted Gorl.

Keen winked his eyes rapidly but retained control of himself. He quietly insisted, "Not robbery, Allan, when you take from those skunks. They stole the tent and everything in it. As to the land this whole game is robbery. Don't try to smooth it over. No matter what else we do, let's not fool ourselves."

"My claim to my lot out here is an honest one," insisted Gorl as they walked back to their claims.

"It'll be an honest one when you can find any company that insures goods and houses in Cheyenne. We have no law, no juries, no judges, no jails. It's every man for himself, and Elder Keen is going to get his fingers in the pie."

"Be careful, Keen, that what you call a pie doesn't turn out to be a trap," warned Gorl. Then he endeavored to prove they were within their legal rights in taking up the land, and to insist that killings would turn the town against them and make their rights worthless.

Keen smiled sceptically and replied that no one in Cheyenne would be interested in the demise of the stranger, and that the "Bible crowd" wouldn't care how many of that kind were killed. He concluded by warning:

"Don't get any foolish notions about this game we're playing. Whether we're right or wrong we won't be allowed to hold the land once law courts come and lawyers get to running things. We must make a quick profit and be satisfied."

"Now just what do you mean by that?"

"We must sell as quickly as possible. Now the rough work's been done there'll be those who will gamble by buying."

"My claim is mine. I'll sell when the market goes up and I can get what I ask. Twenty-five hundred dollars. When the tracklayers reach within a mile of the town property prices will jump."

Keen smiled grimly and seated himself on the ground and lighted a cigar. In the distance groups of men were busily staking off claims and erecting various kinds of shelter. The homicide must have been witnessed by some of these, and the ousted victims must have told all they met. But none left their work to make an inquiry. Their first visitor was Lee Darby, who rode out to them at noon. He said:

"You fellows are in for trouble. Sheriff Sweeney and the town marshal will run every squatter out of town."

Keen shook his head. Gorl looked worried, but insisted, "They can't do that."

"They will do that," earnestly replied Darby. "I tell you, man, this game won't work. I was at the indignation meeting at City Hall. Gather up your traps and go back with me."

"I'm within my rights. I won't quit," Gorl doggedly answered.

"I'm sorry. I came to do you a good turn." With that he turned and galloped away.

"Good fellow, but he lacks gumption," muttered Gorl, uneasy despite his insistence on his rights.

"You're partly wrong," chuckled Keen. "He's dead right. Not that we have to quit in a minute. But if anyone offers you anything for your claim, you take it."

After a period of silence Gorl remarked, "Elder, that dead man bothers me."

"He tried to bother me." Then fiercely, "What's the matter with you? I saved your life last night when a Julesburger had you at the point of a gun. One of the same breed started to pull a gun on me and I drilled him. You tried to get the man who drew on you by heaving a knife. And a pretty heave it was. But the other fellow had you cold. If my gun hadn't sent him to hell for his hash you'd be two feet under the grass this morning."

Gorl had no answer for this. Keen had saved him from being murdered. Yet he knew the two situations differed widely. The Julesburg roughs in the saloon had attempted to force him into a quarrel. Keen had deliberately stalked his man, intending to drive him away or into an attempt at violence. He moodily chewed his cigar without lighting it. The day was clear and with a touch of frost in the breeze steadily blowing from the northwest. He began to notice the effect of this steady wind pressure on the few trees he could see. They grew on an incline, leaning to the southeast. He vaguely wondered how the steady influence of the Elder and his twisted code of ethics would effect a man associated with him over long. He almost regretted he had not returned with Darby.

The Elder watched him furtively, trying to guess his line of thought. Their silence was interrupted by the Elder remarking, "Here comes a man on business. Dollars, or blood."

Gorl lifted his head and discovered a horseman approaching at a gallop. When assured the rider was coming to them he got on his feet. Keen remained on the ground, but shifted the position of his umbrella. The man came to a halt and asked:

"Who owns these two claims?"

"I own one," slowly replied Keen; and he watched the man sharply to guard against reprisal for the man killed that morning.

"What'll you sell for?"

"Two thousand dollars."

"I'll give three hundred and take my chances."

Keen nodded toward the lot he had jumped and replied, "I'll sell if you'll take over that lot with the tent for the same price. Tent and stuff there goes with it."

"You own it?"

"Just as much as I own this one?"

"I'll take the two. Sign your name at the bottom of this paper. I'll have to fill in the boundaries later." He handed down the paper and a pencil and turned to Gorl, asking:

"What about you, neighbor?"

"I'm really holding mine for two thousand."

The horseman nodded and did not attempt to dicker. As he took the paper from the Elder and thrust it inside his coat the Elder came to his feet, the end of the umbrella covering him, the Elder's eyes watching the concealed hand. But the hand was withdrawn, holding nothing more dangerous than a huge roll of banknotes. The horseman passed over the money and while he waited for Keen to count it Gorl inquired:

"Just how do you expect to hold this land without staying on it?"

"I don't care how many jump it. After the courts come I'll make my claim and show my papers and ask to have any squatters ousted. It's a gamble. Squatter's title. Now I must hurry to get more."

He galloped away and Keen smiled sardonically and told Gorl, "You may get more money for yours, but I feel you'll never get a cent. I believe you're foolish not to sell."

"If I had believed my title wouldn't stand law I'd never have come out here this morning," retorted Gorl.

"With six hundred dollars in my clothes I can't afford to stay out here," announced Keen. "If your title's good it can't be taken away from you. You heard what that speculator said. Better go back with me. If some of that dead man's friends come out and catch you alone you'd have no more chance than a rabbit."

"I'll go back with you," agreed Gorl. "Not because I fear those fellows, but because it won't do me any good to stay here."

"Friend, I've taken a liking to you," mused the Elder. "We've got along rather queer together. There was the camp in the hills—"

"That drunk cost me a thousand dollars. You never loaned me a dollar, Elder," broke in Gorl.

The Elder refused to take umbrage. He

continued, "There's the different times you've been uppish with me. There have been times when I never believed I'd ever bother to save your life. But, as you remind, there was that thousand dollars, and because of that I did stop the Julesburger from letting daylight through you. Here's what I am getting at: you're a business man and I'm not. You're supposed to be shrewd. Yet you saw me drive those squatters off their claim and you never stop to think other squatters can come and drive you off yours, or kill you."

"They might not find that so easy as you appear to think," growled Gorl.

WHEN they were near the edge of the town they met Sweeney and a posse of five men. Sweeney reined in and demanded, "Have you two men taken up any land this morning?"

"I have no land," promptly answered Keen.

"I have a claim," said Gorl.

"You may think so, Gorl, but you haven't," said the sheriff. "This business must stop."

"I'm on my way to town. The land I claim can't run away," retorted Gorl. "I believe my right is a legal one. No plot of the town-site has been filed with any land commissioner, or with anyone else."

"You have no rights to land you did not buy," angrily insisted the sheriff. "I'm surprised that a man of your understanding should get such notions."

"My claim is back there. If I can't hold it legally I can't hold it at all. This talk hasn't any point. It isn't a jail offense if I claim everything from here to the Pacific Ocean."

"We have no jail yet. The real point is this. All damned squatters are going to clear out." With that the sheriff and his men rode on.

Gorl was in an angry frame of mind as he went on to town. The sheriff's talk had humiliated him. He had pictured himself as having taken advantage of a peculiar situation and legally, if not morally, profiting. Sweeney's characterization hurt his pride.

Keen easily interpreted his companion's sullen mood and was deeply amused. He broke the silence by reminding, "Sheriff didn't mean me. I ain't a squatter. I made a pretty fair morning's profit. You lost your chance. Six hundred ain't to be sneezed at. Darby asked you to quit. Sheriff says you must quit." He glanced ahead, and with a harsh laugh added, "Here comes more pressure for you to quit."

Gorl's bowed head came up and he saw them, Mike Dolin and the Spanish girl. They were afoot and the big Irishman carried his spike-maul over his shoulder. Seeing Gorl the girl started forward on the run. Gorl quickened his pace to have a few moments of privacy with her. The girl's greeting was irritating, for she said:

"My friend, what foolish thing you! Why does Señor Gorl, ver' beeg business man, be a squatter?"

"No more of that, Dollie," growled Gorl. "You don't know what you're talking about."

Dolin, hurrying up, exploded, "There was the divils carting away the U. P. ties that cost two dollars 'n' half apiece before the construction crew touched 'em!"

Gorl now discovered the girl had been weeping. More gently he said, "If I haven't a right to the land, Dollie, I don't want it. I've located a claim. If it isn't mine I haven't robbed anyone. Where shall we go to eat?"

"She promised the auld woman to eat to home," spoke up Dolin. "An' ye're welcome to come along an' have a bite with us."

"What's the matter with you?" complained Gorl. "Is this young woman a prisoner?"

"The saints forbid! I was thinkin' she's free for the first time in a long time. It's not for Mike Dolin to say where she eats. I was speakin' about her promise to the auld woman."

"Come to the house. Mrs. Dolin is the only friend I have," said the girl.

"Then I don't figure as a friend?" bitterly complained Gorl.

She sighed and in a low voice replied, "Such a ver' beeg friend if you will, Allan Gorl. Such a good friend. We will eat a ver' fine dinner with Señora Dolin."

Elder Keen, having witnessed Gorl's capture, shifted his course and made haste to get back to the saloons and learn how the day had gone with the other squatters. He found the long barroom of the first saloon he entered filled with excited and loudly talking men. Finding Charley

Martin he took him aside and eagerly asked for the news.

"Sheriff drew deuces. Squatters laughed at him. He had to quit."

Keen frowned. He was disappointed that the posse had failed. If the officers of the law could not oust the squatters then he had been too precipitate in selling. He would be bitterly chagrined if Gorl, by holding out, should find his judgment vindicated and should ultimately sell for a big price.

"Didn't do the sheriff any good," mused Keen. "Thought there might be some shooting."

"There's a kick made about a man killed outside the town this morning," added Martin. "A squatter. His pards, fetched him to the buryin'-ground in a cart, Julesburgers. They was saying he was murdered."

"They lie," promptly informed Keen. "He must be the man who drew on me. I shot in self-defense. Allan Gorl was a witness and will say that. That all?"

"Boys just heard a new gun-fighter is in town. Ain't heard his name yet."

"Town's full of new gun-fighters. Most of 'em will never have a chance to age any. I'm hungry."

He took a seat in a corner, where he had the crowd before him. Any other but Elder Keen might have been kept waiting, but a Mexican boy did not hesitate to remove another man's dinner from his tray. Keen placed his umbrella across his knees and was about to enjoy the glass of whisky that accompanied the dinner when a scrawny hand anticipated him. He glanced up, his eyes blazing. Fevernager, with his right hand resting on the handle of a gun, held the glass half raised and challenged;

"Be I to drink this in quiet, or do we shoot for it?"

"You're welcome to my drink without grabbing for it," slowly replied Keen.

"Everyone's grabbing things to-day," growled the old plainsman. "And don't make no back-talk to a he-grizzly that's riled to his ears."

Keen clasped his hands on the table before him and smiled as he curiously queried, "Meaning yourself, of course?"

"Just myself," grumbled Fevernager. "You grabbed my dinner from that young greaser." And he pointed an accusing finger at the food.

Keen laughed as if genuinely amused, and caught the Mexican boy's attention and peremptorily motioned for him to approach. Without a word to the boy he shifted the food from the tray to the table and kicked out a stool for the plainsman. Then he directed the boy to return immediately with the bottle of whisky.

Somewhat mollified Fevernager sat down and bolted his drink. Keen nodded at the food and said, "There you are, old grizzly. Eat and stop showing your claws."

"It w'ant the dinner entirely that riled me," the plainsman explained between huge mouthfuls. "I've shortened four inches tramping 'round, a-looking for Lee Darby. Ever since I woke up with two men in my bed at the Dodge House someone, or something has been brushing my fur the wrong way. Where's Gorl?"

Keen told him of seeing Darby and of Gorl's whereabouts. The plainsman appeared to be much relieved and remarked, "Now if he'll stick close to town he won't git into trouble."

"How trouble? Worst that can happen to him is for that little Spaniard to catch him for a husband."

"No sirree! That would be the best thing to happen to the big lummox. He's just the biggest damndest fool I ever see. And back East they called him a smart man! If he goes back to that claim of his he'll be in trouble up to his neck."

"Nonsense! Sheriff can't do a thing with that crowd of squatters. He's tried it and they laugh at him."

"That may go for the sheriff, but not for the fort soldiers. They've been sent for," replied Fevernager.

Keen's eyes widened. "Soldiers?" he scoffed. "What use to call in the army to settle land disputes and handle a parcel of squatters?"

"I reckon it was along of a man bein' murdered this morning that fetched the soldiers out," Fevernager explained. "Anyway, the town has asked the commandant to stop the stealing of land, to stop killings. Folks here are now talking about forming a vigilance committee. They was yapping about it at City Hall this morning after a dead man was brought to the buryin' ground. Dead man's friends swear they'll git the killer if the soldiers don't git him first."

It was obvious that the plainsman had

no idea as to the identity of the "killer"; nor did Elder Keen enlighten him. Fevernager went on, "There's talk about a new man-eater blowing in. Prob'ly he done the job to show how nifty he is."

"I see," mused Keen. "Probably the new gun-fighter." And for the rest of the meal he ate hurriedly and talked but little. As soon as he had finished he tapped the bottle of whisky and told his companion, "Drink to my good health, friend. I have some business to attend to." He rose and with his umbrella held before him worked his way rapidly through the groups of men and into the street.

THE commandant at Fort Russell did not send any of his troops to quell the disorder due to the squatters till it became apparent the peace-officers of Cheyenne were unable to cope with the situation. The greater number of squatters were from Julesburg and had been actuated by a community of interest in proceeding with their wholesale raid. Their indignation was great when the murder of one of their number became known. The victim's companions sufficiently identified Elder Keen when they spoke of his umbrella; and vows of vengeance were heard in all the resorts immediately after Keen had effaced himself.

Then there crept into the gossip of saloons and dance-halls that Keen was in hiding; not from the soldiers but from an unknown badman, who was drawn to the creek by Keen's reputation. If this ambitious seeker after Keen's laurels were in town he could not be pointed out or named. Several desperadoes, with gun reputations, were mentioned but none seemed to be of caliber sufficient to drive a man of the Elder's standing into hiding. It was commonly agreed that the unknown was waiting in some ranch-house, waiting for a confederate to announce the Elder's return to town. The Elder's friends believed he had set forth to find and effectually deal with the would-be usurper of his reputation as gun-fighter.

The soldiers from the fort were led by the young lieutenant, who had gone to the rescue of Darby at Robbers' Roost. The squatters were driven off their claims in a most business-like manner and escorted to the town limits. Many re-entered the town and took up their abode as soon as the soldiers returned to the fort. Mike Dolin, ever loyal to the Union Pacific, worked early and late at hauling back loads of stolen ties. The excitement of the futile raid had barely died down when it was officially announced the railroad would reach the creek on November 13th. A citizens' reception committee was quickly formed and preparations made for a fitting welcome.

On the evening of the ninth Darby and Fevernager were among those who attended the prize-fight between John Hardy and John Shaughnessy, a mile from town. A wild and boisterous crowd saw the two men fight viciously for a hundred and twenty-six rounds. During the progress of the encounter Darby gave a violent start and nudged the plainsman, and whispered:

"Directly across from us! See his tall hat?"

"I see dozens of stovepipes everywhere. But I come here to see the fight. Irishman seems to be winning. Whoopee! Maul him! Maul him! Bite his ear off, *Kola!* Bite his ear off, you fool!" This as Shaughnessy rallied with a vicious attack.

"It's Keen!" softly exclaimed Darby, trying to watch the ring while he kept an eye on the long, melancholy face of the killer.

"He's got him! Take his scalp, *Kola!*" howled the plainsman. And great was his rage when Hardy doubled up and the referee announced him a winner on a foul.

Those who had wagered on Hardy were jubilant. The other faction yelled threats and pronounced the referee a "robber". Almost oblivious to the excitement Darby worked his way around the ring while trying to keep his gaze on Keen's tall hat. As that style of head-gear was common he soon was searching at random, but he did find himself face to face with Gorl. The Easterner had been drinking heavily but was steady on his feet. He slapped a heavy hand on Darby's shoulder and boasted:

"Cleaned up a thousand! Hope you had something down on Hardy."

"Not a penny on either man. But I hoped t'other one would win. I'm looking for Elder Keen."

"What do you want with the Elder?"

"To tell him he's a fool to be here."

"Squatter business. I understand. But that's all gone through the wash," said Gorl. "He's all right now. He'd been back before if he hadn't been doing a little looking on his own account. Right behind me somewhere. We're going to town together."

"But there's men in town who will look him up."

"No." And Gorl shook his big head emphatically. "I know the temper of the town as well as anyone. Especially the temper of those who might be silly enough to try any game on our friend. Besides, everyone has forgotten that little matter. Too much else to think about. Graders are almost at the creek. Iron will reach us the 13th. Then the trains will come in and we won't have to depend on Wells, Fargo for letters any more. Old order changes when we hear the engine tooting."

Darby locked arms, so they might not be separated by the stampede to town, and said, "Wish you were in position to take advantage of it, Gorl. Things will surely hum once we have through trains from Omaha."

"I'm in the driver's seat," Gorl gruffly replied. "Don't speak of me as something that's all finished. Our meat business will be immense if you can keep hunters out. I'll get busy with the Easterners on board the first train and work up some big deals. There will be from ten to twelve thousand people on the creek this winter, and the town will howl. Once the snow and ice melts on the top of Sherman there'll be a chance for me to do what I failed to do in this town. The end of the division is about sixty miles from here and on the Laramie River. The next big town will spring up at that point. They're bound to put in machine and repair shops. If our gold expedition doesn't work out I'll be on the Laramie two months before any land is thrown on the market."

Darby would have endorsed this ambition if not for the arrangement to sell meat, and the reiterated desire to fly off at a tangent in search of gold. He feared that with so many tentative irons in the fire the Rhode Island man would end by heating none. Money from land speculations did not interest him as he had no capital. Hunting for the market through the white months did not appeal as being feasible. He was beginning to worry as to just what he would do through the winter. And the plantation in Louisiana seemed to be farther off than ever.

He talked but little as he walked along with Gorl. The Easterner loudly enumerated golden possibilities. Fevernager, keeping at their heels, smiled in his beard and wagged his head from side to side to catch a glimpse of Keen.

On entering the town Gorl announced he was expected at Dolin's for supper, but would see them somewhere during the evening. He intimated that Keen would be with him, although the Elder had failed to join him on the way to the creek.

AFTER they had parted from Gorl and were seated in an eating-house the plainsman observed his friend was in low spirits and eagerly urged:

"Have a snort of rum and feel *wakan*. You act up like you'd dreamed of bears."

"It's the unevenness of it all," bitterly explained Darby. "I'm willing to break my back working, to risk my neck for the sake of a stake. And I can't find a chance. Gorl has had every chance and is even now tossing them away like so much rubbish."

Fevernager nodded sympathetically and said, "I've been watching you, younker. Seen how you was tying up to that Gorl, or trying to tie up. You're wasting your time. All he thinks of is riding on the lazy-board. He don't care a hoot how his team is heading. Can't even see the leaders. He won't never amount to a damn. He's out here to make the eagle scream. You hanker to make your pile and go back home. There's just one chance for a younker out here, who can't trade in land, won't run a store, and won't stay'n' grow up with the country. Gold. I don't have no use for the stuff beyond a year's supply of terbaccer 'n' whisky 'n' enough shoots of powder. But you're honing for quick money.

"All right. Prob'ly doing you a bad, 'stead of good turn. When young Baltimore comes back in the spring we'll go through the Dakota country flying. If he don't show up we'll risk it alone. I'll git you gold, or git you killed."

"Amen!" earnestly echoed Darby.

"Then that's settled. My day's dying. Might as well die with it. You'll gamble your life ag'in a pile. You figger life ain't worth a busted hat without the pile. If we both peg out, all hunky. We both know in a wide way where poor Strawberry Sam made his strike. Somewhere in the Bear

Lodge country, the Pa-ha-sa-pah Hills. In white talk, Black Hills. Up north, hugged by the forks of the Cheyenne. It's a goodish hunk of country, but plenty of gold is there."

He was rewarded by the quick and complete change in his friend's visage. Darby grasped his hand and pressed it convulsively, and said, "That's a mighty good talk, Fevernager. You've heartened me. I'll try for work on the railroad this winter. If Gorl cuts loose from Keen we'll think about taking him along."

"Bah! Might as well take along a blind buffler. . . . But we don't have to go into that now. Mebbe rum'll kill him 'fore spring." The last was said optimistically. He sampled his drink and remarked, "This kind of whisky oughter to finish him quick. Tastes like Perry Davis' Pain Killer."

From the eating-house they walked along with the jostling throng and finally found themselves in front of Headquarters Saloon on 16th Street. He abruptly ceased urging Darby to enter to stare sharply at a figure leaning against the building. Stepping forward he inquired, "Young Kensler, what you doing south of the Platte?"

"Half white; have a right where white men go," sullenly replied the breed. "Half Dakota; can go where the Dakota go."

"Watch your step. Town's rough," warned Fevernager.

"Listen, *Kola*," whispered the breed. "There is whisky inside. I have no money."

"You git drunk and you'll wind up in the happy-hunting grounds. But I knew your father. Here's four bits."

"Listen, *Kola*," repeated the breed and not offering to take the silver. "I have more than that. It will be bad for me if I show it inside. Give me five dollars for this."

He withdrew his hand from under his blanket and pressed something into the plainsman's hand. The latter stepped into the light from the window and glanced down. Then he motioned with his head for Darby to advance and look. The breed had given three small nuggets of gold.

"Worth 'bout three dollars each," he murmured to Darby. Turning back to the breed he said, "I'll give you two dollars for these. Tell me where you found it and I'll give you five."

"Listen, *Kola*. There is a scalping-knife, sharpened for the white man who goes where I found it. It is a medicine country."

"*Mato Tipi*," quickly said Fevernager. "Grizzly Bear Lodge in white lingo. Or Bear Butte. Take yer ch'ice. Flat-topped critter. Never was to it, but I've seen it. Ye can see it, Darby, when a hundred miles from it. It's a very big medicine country. Ye believe in its medicine, Kensler?"

"The trees of *Mato Tipi* are filled with rocks. Children put them there as there is a strong spirit in the rocks that will help them. A child only goes once to put a rock in a tree, yet the trees have many rocks between their branches. The Fetons camp at the foot of the mountain and make medicine."

"Then ye do believe in it," said the plainsman.

"The red part of me does. The white part of me believes in whisky."

"Does the white blood want a big drunk, or a little drunk?"

"All the blood wants a big drunk, a bottle drunk. Away from the town. There is gold in the *Mato Tipi* country, west of it and among the hills."

"It bears out what poor Sam told you, Darby, the Black Hills. If ever whites stampede up there for gold, hell will start popping." He thrust his hand inside his hunting shirt and the breed uneasily muttered:

"It is a bad medicine place for white men, *Kola*. My father knew gold was there but he did not touch it."

"And he lived out his years. Reds would 'a' brained him if he'd started washing dirt. . . . Here is five dollars, Kensler. Take yer whisky a good ride from town before you drink, or you'll wake up talking to your red grandmother."

With the bargain completed Kensler hurried away to find a less conspicuous place for making his purchase. Darby drew a deep breath and hoarsely whispered, "I'll make a try for it even if I go alone, as Strawberry Sam did."

"My day is 'bout done. I'll go with you," promised the plainsman. The speech was ripe with forebodings but Darby was not to be discouraged.

They entered the big saloon, a hundred feet long and thirty-five feet wide, and found the long bar doing a tremendous business. Men were loudly discussing the prize-fight, the coming of the railroad, and the latest shooting affairs. Many newcomers had made Cheyenne that day, and these largely were parasites, hurrying ahead of the construction trains to secure permanent lodgings. A large number of railroad laborers also were present for a holiday. These men, tanned by wind and sun to a copper color, were Irishmen, mostly.

Mike Dolin, seeking his countrymen, came through the door and began shouting Celtic names. He was quickly recognized by old acquaintances and given a boisterous welcome. Darby admired their loyalty to their blood as he watched them line up and partake of whisky. In another five minutes Dolin was engaged in a desperate fist-fight with one of his friends. The spectacle they presented after the spirited combat was more gory than that of Hardy and Shaughnessy after their many rounds.

Fevernager's eyes glistened, and he commented, "Best muss since the last time my outfit fought all among ourselves at Brown's Hole."

Dolin and his opponent were now laughing uproariously at the joke they had played on themselves. One had misunderstood what the other had said and there was no reason whatever for hard feelings.

DARBY and the plainsman secured seats against the wall and ordered drinks. Men who lived by gambling, sprucily dressed and sallow of face, were mingling with the hilarious, jostling workmen, seeking victims. Hays, Charley Martin, and Shorty came in together, eager for profit in any shape it might be obtained. It happened that the tall figure of Shorty bumped into the brawny figure of Dolin, as the latter was declaring his undying, brotherly affection for his recent antagonist. So great was Dolin's good nature at the moment he gave no heed to Shorty.

The desperado seized him by the shoulder and pulled him about and snarled, "You want to be careful, damn you!"

Dolin stared at him as if not comprehending. Then he said, "Ye thumped ag'in me back."

"Next time I'll break your neck," warned Shorty.

Dolin edged back, as if avoiding an encounter, and remarked, "There was Dolins kings of Ireland in the auld days." With that he swung his mighty fist and Shorty's tall figure crashed backward on the floor. Loud shouts of approval and much laughter greeted the incident.

Dolin explained to his friends, "That is the way I'd hit Sullivan if I'd not been fooling with him."

Hays and Martin worked their way forward, their eyes blazing, their hands on their hips. Men fell back, leaving a cleared space around the unconscious Shorty. Dolin was doubling his arm to exhibit his mighty biceps when Jack Hays tapped him on the shoulder. Dolin slowly wheeled about and Hays told him:

"You struck my friend when he wasn't looking."

Dolin stared blankly and made no reply. His wild friends assumed he was about to give them another exhibition of his strength and skill, whereas the giant was suddenly remembering how deadly Hays and his ilk were. Fortunately for his reputation among the graders and track-layers one of the latter was jealous of his countryman. He leaped between the two men and with a shove of his open hand sent Hays reeling backward. Martin caught him and saved him from falling his length. Derisive hoots were hurled at Hays by those new to Cheyenne. Martin aided Hays to regain his balance, and bruskly said—

"All right, Jack. Get both of them."

Hays slowly reached for a gun, hoping to tempt one or both of the workmen to draw a weapon. Fevernager appeared behind Martin and rested the barrel of a Navy model on the latter's shoulder and loudly warned:

"Put that gun back, Hays, or say howdy to hell! Stand still, Martin."

Martin winced but made no effort to move. Hays turned his head and found the muzzle of the thirty-eight uncomfortably close.

The track-layers, not understanding, were inclined to resent the old man's intrusion. He was spoiling a good fight. One yelled that the "auld coot" be thrown out. But Dolin had recovered his voice and loudly shouted:

"Stop it! Close yer traps. It's me frind, old Fevernager. The lad he's squelching is a gun-fighter. The lad he's leaning forninst is a gun-fighter. Here comes another good frind of mine. Meet Misther Darby."

As the Southerner stood beside the plainsman Shorty groaned and rolled over and slowly crawled to his feet. As intelligence seeped back he howled with rage and started to draw a gun. Darby caught his wrist and held it, and with his free hand poked the muzzle of a revolver into the bully's ribs, and advised:

"You and your friends better go away. Try any games and this crowd will tear you to pieces. Fevernager and I will keep you covered so you can't use a gun. Get out and stay out, or fight with your fists."

As fisticuffs were not to the liking of the three bullies they made for the door without a word, and were followed by a volley of abusive epithets. This incident resulted in the immediate adoption of the plainsman as a true son of Erin, much to Darby's disgust. Fevernager was urged to drink, and he needed no encouragement. Declining hard liquor Darby returned to his table and over a glass of beer watched his friend reach a stage of jollification wherein he gave his grizzly-bear dance, his new friends taking it up and presenting an absurd spectacle. Dolin, who was in to make a night of it, endeavored to coax Darby into the merrymaking.

"What will the little woman say?" sternly reminded Darby. "Go home now, while you can walk. I'll go part way with you to see that none of the Hays crowd kills you. You're not so drunk you don't understand what I'm saying?"

Dolin slowly set his filled glass on the table and fear showed in his gray eyes. Darby continued, "Hays and his friends will be waiting for you. Will you go with me?"

"To hell with Hays an' the rist of thim," muttered Dolin. "I was not thinking of thim for a little bit. It's the auld woman. God help us poor Irish if she brings a fight. What she done to us at North Platte was enough for a life-time. I'll go before she comes, but I must sneak out like a fox or the lads will hold me."

He made his escape under cover of one of the plainsman's stories, and the Southerner followed him. He took a straight course for home with Darby at his heels, a revolver ready for instant work. They were not troubled, however, and the Southerner breathed with relief when his charge turned to enter his home. The door flew open and a small fury was cuffing and smacking Dolin's face, and a wrathful voice was denouncing:

"I heard yer clumsy step, ye big good-for-nothing. Trying to sneak in that I mightn't know, ye drunken rascal. Trying—"

"Señor Darby!" shrilly exclaimed the Spanish girl.

Then Mrs. Dolin saw him and ceased her punishment and blandly explained, "I was that worrit about Mike. He was that late coming home I thought the poor dear had come to harm. Come in, Misther Darby."

Darby excused himself and hurriedly explained that the head of the house had whipped a vicious rascal, facing gun-fire to do it, and that he was entitled to praise rather than censure. He pointed to Dolin's battered face and pronounced the wounds so many badges of courage and indications of his American manhood. Mrs. Dolin was quite overcome and was all affection as she clung to her husband. Darby endeavored to withdraw but the Spanish girl came to the doorway and asked:

"Where is Señor Gorl, my friend? Two days and I do not see him."

"He was around town early in the evening. Probably in bed by now. I saw him at the prize-fight."

"You will be his good friend, my friend?" she pleaded.

"I'll be as good a friend as he will let me. But I'm quite sure he's all right."

She thanked him and he started back to the saloon, now worrying about Fevernager. If the old plainsman reached the reckless plane in his drinking there was no guessing what wild pranks he would play. And the Hays gang did not forgive.

Many heavy voices shouting some kind of chant partly reassured him as he reached Headquarters Saloon. Entering he beheld the plainsman perched on the bar, facing his admirers, and leading them in an Oglala Dakota scalp-song. Knowing it would be useless to attempt curbing his friend at this stage of the evening's hilarity the Southerner found a table where he could watch the door. Each time the door opened he expected to behold Hays, or one of his friends, returned to pick off the plainsman from his high perch. After the song was repeated Fevernager dropped lightly to the floor and loudly announced that as a free and careless son of the West the drinks were on him so long as his pile held out. To Darby's great disgust he placed gold nuggets, instead of money, on the bar.

A bartender scooped up the nuggets and announced, "Five dollars' credit, old man."

"Ten dollars, ye scut!" roared Fevernager.

The bartender quickly bowed acquiescence. A man, who might have been a gambler or a parson by his dress, edged close and remarked, "Surely ten dollars' worth. You have a placer-mine, my friend."

"Up in the Wind River valley, where the water turns ye into stone, where th' reds won't go along of it being bad medicine. An' I ain't yer friend yet," replied the plainsman.

By the time he shifted his attention from the bar Darby saw Gorl and Elder Keen standing inside the door. He raised a hand and caught their attention and they joined him. Keen abruptly said:

"The old man's making a fool of himself with his nuggets. These workmen don't count, but dozens here are ready to trail him. I'm glad he had sense enough to tell the Wind River story."

"How do you know it's a story?" asked Darby.

"No, no, Darby. Not with Elder Keen," smilingly replied the apostate Mormon. "The gold came from the Black Hills, perhaps from near the place where poor Strawberry Sam found his."

Darby was nonplussed but simulated amusement and insisted, "How can you be cock-sure of that?"

Keen chuckled and nodded to Gorl. The latter drew out a small handful of tiny nuggets and allowed the Southerner to examine them. "You see, Darby, I have some from the same place that Fevernager's came from. A half-drunk young breed sold them for twenty dollars."

"And told you where they came from?"

"Sure."

"The damn' fool!" exclaimed Darby. "I mean he's a fool to peddle his secret in Cheyenne. He was to take his liquor out of town before drinking any."

"But he didn't," Keen said.

"How do you intend to profit by your secret?" curiously asked Darby.

"Go after the stuff," Gorl promptly replied. "Keen and I have made an agreement."

"Game's open to anyone who will risk it," remarked Darby. "Fevernager and I may try it."

"Then throw in with Gorl and me," eagerly suggested Keen.

"I'd planned to take Gorl along with us, but I don't like your crowd."

"They're fools," denounced Keen, wrinkling his lips in disgust. "Don't think for a second I'd take any of them into the Sioux country with me. Or after gold if there weren't any Injuns. If you need gun-play you'll need it bad."

"I'll have to talk with Fevernager. Think about it. Plenty of time as nothing can be done until spring. You've been away from town for a bit, Elder."

"Just riding around, looking for a man who thinks he wants to find me."

Before he could elucidate, provided he had the intention, he was prevented by the staccato explosion of several guns down the street. The three men at the table ran to the door and beheld what appeared to be a riderless horse racing madly by the saloon.

Pedestrians wildly leaped aside. As the horse entered the lamp-light a man lying flat on his back came to a sitting posture. The onlookers glimpsed a bronze arm plying a quirt. To the wrist of the arm was tied a bottle of whisky.

Keen drew his hand from inside the umbrella and fired. The bottle disappeared. Young Kensler went over the side of his mount.

"You killed him!" gasped Darby.

"No such good luck!" snapped Keen, restoring his gun. "Some fool jostled my elbow. My lead smashed the bottle. And there he goes, scot-free, hanging on by toe and hand. There he goes, to tell everyone south of the Platte where nuggets are to be picked up by the handful."

In the chapters to follow Lee Darby and Elder Keen draw ever closer to their final grim reckoning.

A Short Yarn and a Merry One

Good Swedes as Swedes Go

By

CYRUS CHAPIN

Granpa Benny is our partner in a farm up Sonoma way. We find his letters—expurgated though they sometimes have to be—rather funny. If you don't, I won't pester you with any more.

Cazadero, California, August 15, 19—

DEAR CY:

When we started to farm up here I kicked because it was not big enough me being 80 year old next June but of fine stock and now I find 40 acres is a plenty with no help but that Laplander you sent me. I told you to send me a big Swede with an axe so he could clear off trees. This Laplander is no good except around deer of which there is plenty even with the nimrods hunting which they are droves of from the city but they don't kill any so no harm is done. If they shoot our cows I will have the law on them if there is any. The poison oak is onery and no wonder you want it cleared off but the Swede could do that if you would send him.

This Laplander wants to catch deer and train them for what he dont know. Neither do I. Maybe you could sell them to a circus. He wears a fur hat day and night and never takes his clothes off far as I know and is good to catch varmints of all kinds of which there is many. Maybe you could trade this Laplander for a Swede with a double bitted axe and then we could get something done up here.

This air is fine but the people are lazy and shifless except Christofer and his wife and some dagoes who work all the time, and them kind is always good neighbors. If you dont send me a Swede I will fire this Laplander and marry again and raise some boys of my own again and they will have to work or I will tan their hides. This would take a long time though the air is fine and boys would grow faster than usual.

The dagoes make wine with their feet which they claim they wash daily in the creek which is one of the many things in life we have to take the other man's word for. Anyway they dont get corned and they wont sell the wine except to folks they know and they know everybody. The wine is 75 cents a gallon if you come for it and dont drink if off hand on their land.

The hens you sent last lay as well as city hens could be expected but they will lay down on the job if you don't feed them and feed costs money and why I dont raise feed is because all the cleared land is in grapes as you wanted and if the Swede was here, he could clear more land and then we could plant feed for the hens and they would lay well at no expense except the Swedes board and wages and he could do other work. If I hadn't of gone and got religion I could relieve him of his wages at poker and then we would be ahead sure enough.

You said you longed to make fish preserves in the mountain brook which gurgles by the door of our vine covered cabin or poetically as you can only put it and I want to say that this would be all right but here again comes in the Swede if we had him. He could fell the trees to damn the puddles where your fish basked and sported in the golden sunlight as you say in your letters which look all right on paper and flowery enough as you always are. You say you will want to take off your coat and work out of doors and get tired so you can sleep as only a man of the soil can sleep. If you work it will be the first time as you were no good when you was a boy and not worth your salt. You will be welcome anyway as you well know whether you work or not which you wont, but you will be more welcome if you bring the Swede.

Yours truly,
GRANPA BENNY.

Cazadero, September 12, 19—.

Dear Cy:

I am sorry you could not come but the Swede is here which is better. Now we will get some work done. I have seen some big Swedes in my day but he is the biggest I ever seen and he has a fine axe and keeps it ground and knows how to use it. He is the only man I ever come across who could do almost as much work as I could, despite my eighty year, and not brag about it. As I told you I am up at four of a morning but he is up before me and milks in the dark. His feet are big but not in his way much and he would rather chop down a tree than eat, though he eats plenty which he deserves.

I paid the Laplander off and sent him on his way. Where that is I dont know and I dont care.

I only fear one trouble with the Swede whose name is Bjorgsen and I call him that when I have time to pronounce it, and that is that he looks at the sea which he can smell for the ten miles it is away. As usual with all Swedes his folks signed him before the mast as quick as he was weaned. Either Bjorgsen will run away to sea or get married which would be better as I tell him. Then we would be sure of him if he got a Swedish wife which you might find in the city if you would take the time to advertise and ship her out here if she would work. Bjorgsen says if you can get him a big strong wife so he can take some interest in licking her if she talks back which she will if she is sure enough Swedish which is what he wants. If she puts up a good scrap so much the better as that will seem more like home to both of them and they will get along fine. This is queer talk to us who seldom fought hand to hand with our wimmin folks but far be it from me to change another mans religion or politics.

The hens are laying better as they see feed in sight now that the Swede is here. The rooster and the hens watch him as he chops down the trees as much as to say they know the more land is cleared the more chance they have for grain to be planted for their meals.

There is some kind of varmint what yowls like Ned nights and snuffs around the kitchen in which there is meat sometimes. The Swede says there is mor than one and swears they are wolfs and h will catch one or two and tame them an keep them for watch dogs to scare the res of the wolfs away. I said I would hav none of this as from their tracks they ar as big as a mule and would eat us out o house and home. We argued long into th night about this and you will have to settle it when you come as I can handle th Bjorgsen in most ways but when he gets stubborn idee in his dome it is hard to unlodge besides he is bigger than me wh am not quite as strong as I was when was his age but am not letting him kno it. He sleeps in the barn and roars like brace of circus lions which is his snore an can be heard for many miles. When get time I will pad him a cell so he ca growl and roar his head off and not disturb me who need my rest as much as h does. But he is a fine hand and a goo Swede as Swedes go.

You say you will be glad to visit o

sylvan dell and roam the verdure clad hills where formerly the noble savage held sway oer mountain peak and sunny vale. I read some of this to the Swede and he forthwith broke into song for the first time —and last time, if I am the boss here. It is far worse than his snore which is saying a terrible lot. I told him if you did get a bride for him, and he sung for her she would quit him and run off with the first bum that come along.

I will be glad to see you when you finally come which I begin to doubt as anybody would think you had to cross the Alps or the Himalayas to reach here which is only 67 miles and I could walk it in a day and a half if I had to and so could you which you dont have to but only buy a railroad ticket and be there and have your feet under the table eating in four hours. It is so close that when you leave the ferry in San Francisco you are just the same as here. Bjorgsen will also be glad to see you, especially if you bring him a large, raw-boned wife for him which will keep him on the farm, especially if they have children of which they will have plenty of you can depend on that. I told him he could have the cave in the big rock and there they could be happy and fight all they want to and also snore. This tickled him and he will watch for word when you are coming and kill a turkey if you are hungry which we hope is soon.

Yours truly,
GRANPA BENNY.

Cazadero, October 18, 19—.

Dear Cy:

Gol dern your hide. You thought you was smart and you took some risk as is your want when you shipped the big Swede girl Inga up here without no chappyman nor nothing to see the nupital festiviies through proper. Oh why are you so ecklus? The same as when a boy when you should of had it whaled out of you and would if Id of had my say. Anyways he girl come whilst Bjorgsen hid behind a ee.

I says, I thought you wasnt afeard of wimmin, to which he replied back, I aint feard of nothin, but why cause hard feelngs if she turns out to be little or scrawny. says trust Cy as he is a good picker. Well s you know who chose her from out the itys multitudes and shipped her up here she is as big as all out doors but a good looker at that if I do say it as was some judge in my day and am now you can depend on that. Rosy cheeks and white teeth and a good smooth hide and everything. I steps up and greets her by the hand and she says where is Bjorgsen and out he steps from behind the tree and blushed like a big boob. She sizes him up and makes him turn around and looks at his mouth and ears like she was buying a horse and says you'll do but how about me? This was a fittin time for me to leave them to theirselves whilst I goes after the mail and when I come back they were conversing in their native tongues and getting on fine. So including of Uncle Stoffer and Aunt Mopsie from the neighboring farm to give the wedding party tone, we all drove over to the county seat which bill for auto will be sent for you to pay and they was married tight and fast enough by an old justice of the peace with long whiskers which was dignified enough to suit all hands though smelling of strange lickers.

When we arrove back at the farm I give them the cave which is bomb proof and if they fight or snore which they will you can depend on that nobody will get hurt but their own selfs so we should worry but why borrow trouble which they will enjoy anyway.

Inga started right in to get supper and she sure whirls a mean skillet to say the least which means I and Bjorgsen dont have to cook no more meals. Enough of this as they have had no fights as yet and we dont care how they amuse theirselves as long as they do their work which they do far better than you would expect in the honeymoon stages and are very good Swedes as Swedes go.

You say you cannot come up because you are to busy. To hear you tell it San Francisco would stop running and go to sleep and snooze her head off if you left there for a few days which no doubt they would be glad to get rid of you for a while and have some peace and they would be just as much trouble and murderous events going on anyway not blaming you for all of it but why do the papers print so much scandals and trash of which the less said the better for wimmin and children and clean folks to read?

Yours truly,
GRANPA BENNY.

Cazadero, December 6, 19—.

Dear Cy:

I was glad to have you come and visit us but I was more glad to have you go back from whence you come before the storm broke which it did. They had a fight. Meaning in course Bjorgsen and Inga. And it was your fault being dangerously romantic which runs in the family though bald as an egg. When a boy wherever you went trouble brewed and followed in your wake though the Welsh blood in you showed from the fact you was never nowheres about when the smash come. And I never quite figgered whether you was afeared or just liked to start something and then fade away to view the havoc you had wrought from afar whilst laughing harsh.

Anyways what you said to Inga I dont know but quite evident you dug up some Swedish po'try and romance for she told Bjorgsen she would respect him more if he stopped chewing tobacco and learned po'try to say to her especially when it was moonlight nights. Bjorgsen says to hell with the moon and to hell with po'try, and then hostilities begun with her throwing of a plate at him, we being at the festal or supper board at the time and her aim being bad because of her rage she missed Bjorgsen and hit me.

Then they sprung up and clinched and fell to the mat and rolled around in no lovers embrace but fighting to beat the old harry. Then they jumped up and run around the cabin something fearful and finally through the door out into the still night—still before this human whirlwind hit it. As you would say with novelistic tendancies, we will draw a curtain over this distressful scene. It would take two curtains in this case. When I come to proper I got a stick of wood and hit them over their heads intending for to stun them into temporary oblivion only, which done as much good as if I had slapped them on their wrist. At last Inga ran to their cave and barred herself in and Bjorgsen went away in the woods. I crept out and listened at the door of the cave a minute and could hear Inga crying, not softly exactly but more like a mad female tiger would cry I reckon. But aint it funny that no matter how big and husky a woman is, she still has a cry or two in her. Then I went to bed and didnt see any more of them until breakfast.

They both were on hand as though nothing had happened except they was black and blue in spots on their faces and they kind of grinned sheeplike at each other when they thought I wasn't lookin'. Anyway Bjorgsen limps a little yet in his left leg.

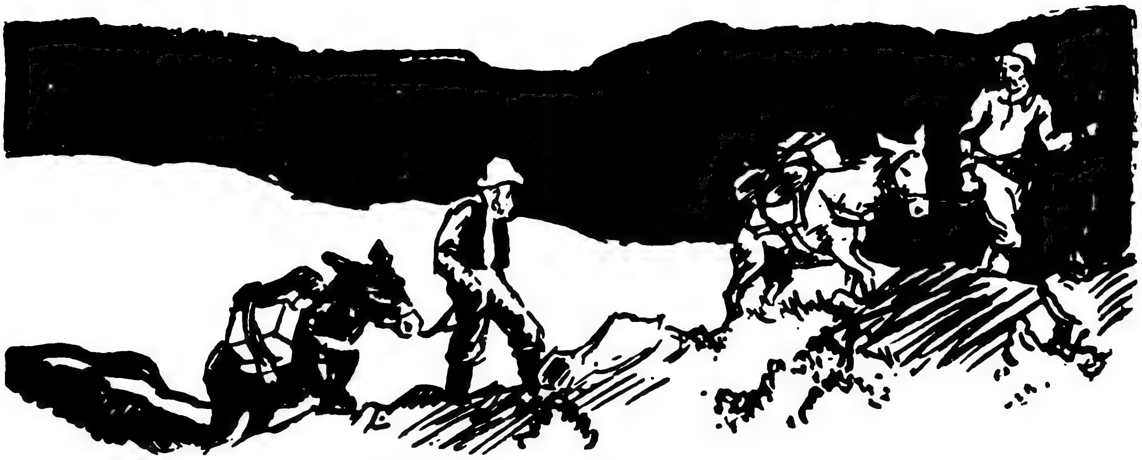
I am afeard to mention your name as it might who knows be the cause of some horrible crime though when Bjorgsen handed me your letter yesterday he was calm enough though turning a little white around the gills I thought.

This afternoon whilst Bjorgsen and me was grubbing stumps in the south field he says sudden like "If I dont lick her she won't love me no more and she's the strongest woman I ever heard tell of. I would just as soon tackle a herd of wild beasts as to get mixed up with that woman, but I must tame her!" Of course this was in broken English words which I can't set down right. To which I replied back after thinking hard:

"Bjorgsen suppose I tell her you wont allow yourself to put forth your full strength being as she is a frail woman and you love her and you are afeard you will break her in two." To which he agreed that I try this and so I did and I dont know with what results as you know Cy wimmin are so foxy, but anyways Inga promised me she would lay off of any more fights but Bjorgsen would have to apologize to the moon and quit chewing tobacco when around the home. I had an awful time with Bjorgsen about the moon part and finally he agreed to it providing he was alone in the forest by himself when he apologized. So a armistice and perhaps permanent peace is resulting I hope, though none to sure.

You said you was going to send some books for Christmas. Don't send no books, leastways no po'try. Far better is some hams and mebbe a phonnygraft with music specially designed to sooth savage breasts.

Yours truly,
GRANPA BENNY.



The Bullet Guide

A Story of Desert Partners

By

ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

SAM SWIFT raised a corner of the dirty, canvas pack cover, and inserted a brown paper package.

"There she be, Gabby. That's the smokin' 'baccy. Now we're plumb broke. We ain't got a nickel between us."

Gabby Hicks turned watery, gray eyes upon the two nondescript burros, looked up and down the main street of Antelope Flat, and expectorated profusely, yet without vigor.

"We should worry about money. We got our grub. Did yuh get plenty of chewin' 'baccy?"

His partner nodded.

"We ain't got no call to kick, then. Let's go."

Each one of the old men took a lead rope from the burros' halters and started shuffling through the dusty street. Passers-by looked at the men and grinned, two old prospectors, headed out into the sandy wastes of the desert. There was something in their appearance which was always good for a grin, a grin that was usually followed by a sigh.

Gabby was tall and thin. His face was clean shaven but hair hung down to his shoulders. Sam Swift was as bald as a billiard ball, but sported a flowing beard which swept down to his chest. They had spent their "stake" for provisions and were headed back to their claim for another four months of solitude.

Suddenly Gabby stopped and fastened a look of reproach on his partner.

"Sam, I bet yuh didn't get me no magazines."

Sam Swift lowered his head and kept his eyes fastened on his matted beard.

"We ain't no money, Gabby."

Gabby shook his white locks.

"Yuh know I've gotta have my readin'. I'd rather have gone without the smokin' 'baccy."

Sam made no reply. There was none to be made. Every trip to town he had stocked up on magazines. It was part of his duties as business manager of the partnership. Gabby liked to read, and would invariably while away the long evenings with a magazine, reading each one three to eight times.

Sam did not read, and considered the money spent for magazines as a sheer waste. Once or twice before, this had nearly proven the rock upon which the partnership had split. This time Gabby seemed inclined to press matters to a showdown.

"That settles it," went on Gabby, his watery eyes fired with indignation, his hair quivering. "Yuh done spent all the money on things *you* like, an' yuh ain't figgered on me none. We'll divide up the claims an' live separate this winter."

Sam Swift clutched his beard, his eyes wide.

"Aw, say, Gabby, yuh wouldn't split up over that! Why, dawggone it, I'll git yer some magazines! Yuh stay here an' watch them burros an' I'll go hold up a magazine shop. Hang it, I'll steal 'em!"

Nor did Sam wait for a reply. He dropped the lead rope and scuttled around the corner. Gabby made as if to follow, looked at the loaded burros, and sighed, then picked up the rope Sam had dropped and walked to the packed dirt of the sidewalk where he sat down. The burros dropped their ears forward, and the man and pack animals gazed at the ground, waiting with that infinite patience which is possessed by those who measure time by the swinging of nature's pendulum rather than the clacking of man-made clocks.

Sam Swift hurried on, his soul numbed by the thought of losing his partner, no very definite idea in his mind. He knew that Gabby set great store by reading matter but had never anticipated that he would split up the partnership. That was unheard of, a calamity too great to be grasped by finite minds. Sam could hardly remember when he hadn't been pards with Gabby Hicks, and, now that he came to think of it, he hadn't done right about those magazines. . . . He stopped at the combined drug store, news stand and stationery store, and explained his predicament to the young man at the counter. He would be willing to pay for the magazines on the next trip in, would promise to pay twice over.

The young man was at that age when one regards as senile any person who is ten years older, when age is something to be contemplated with sneering superiority. His refusal was more than final. Gazing upon life with the optimistic eyes of twenty-two he saw no reason why he should waste time with an "old codger" and he expressed himself briefly and to the point.

Sam Swift walked to the door, looked across the street and saw the waiting room of Doctor Willit. In Sam's mind there came a vague association of memories. There was the time when he had been hit by the flivver and the frightened motorist had paid for the setting and treatment of a broken arm. Sam remembered there had been a wicker table piled high with various magazines. He hadn't read them, but to him a magazine was a magazine.

He walked across the street and stuck his matted beard in the waiting room, looked at the white-dressed nurse who seemed the impersonation of cool efficiency and lost his nerve.

"You wish to see Doctor Willit?" she asked.

Sam nodded and gulped. Words were beyond his abilities just then. It had seemed perfectly proper to ask for the "loan" of a few magazines while he was crossing the street; but before the cool-eyed nurse his request seemed more than absurd.

"Just a minute," said the nurse, as she crinkled across the office and into an inner door, a vision of stiff-starched white.

SAM wanted to run. He turned, and then a thought entered his mind. He had said he would steal the magazines. There they were, all piled upon the wicker table in the center of the waiting room.

The idea hit him with the swiftness of irresistible impulse. He was half way to the table before he clearly realized what he had in mind, and out of the door with an armful of magazines before he had really determined whether he should entertain the suggestion. Having got that far, it was sink or swim, and old Sam Swift scuttled down the street, bearing his precious magazines like a roadrunner carrying a lizard to her hungry babies.

"Here they are, Gabby," he announced breathlessly. "Git 'em outa sight under that pack cover, quick! Hurry up! Up with this corner, loosen that rope—there we are!"

Gabby was distinctly truculent.

"What kinda magazines are they?"

Sam looked furtively over his shoulder.

"Swell stuff. Readin' fitten for a king. Don't talk so much. We gotta git to mud springs by sundown, an' it's goin' to be hot as blazes out on the desert. Let's go."

Until they had left the main highway it was necessary for each to lead a burro, and there was no opportunity for conversation. Two hours later when they had covered five miles and could turn the burros loose Gabby had recovered his usual good spirits, and the partners trudged along, side by side, exchanging only an occasional comment, serene in the companionship of perfect understanding, each willing to lay down his life for the other should occasion arise.

It was dark when they unpacked, and they were on their way before daylight. It was not until their little cabin was reached on the evening of the third day that Gabby had any chance to examine his magazines. At first Gabby was inclined to demand an explanation, and then the thought came to him that Sam Swift really thought his partner capable of reading and enjoying the technical discussions of the medical magazines.

That settled it. Gabby would read and at least pretend to understand. If Sam Swift thought he had a partner who was so well educated he could comprehend that vast jumble of words, well and good. It would be far from such partner to confess his ignorance.

And so, through the long, winter nights Gabby read of technical terms, of the latest discoveries in the treatment of disease. Most of the articles were worse than meaningless to him, but there was an article on synovitis which was so profusely illustrated that he was able to understand the main drift after the fourth reading. There was also an article on differential diagnosis of cardiac abnormalities in which the writer had inadvertently used language which could be understood by others than physicians.

With the aid of a prized dictionary, Gabby was able to get a glimmering of sense from the articles which he read over and over. That dictionary was one of his most valued possessions, and when he found that it had a supplement of medical terms, Gabby's regard for it amounted to almost a worship. He had originally derived his nickname from a habit of loquacious conversation, and it dearly delighted him to occasionally slip some word into his conversation which he had gleaned from his dictionary and which left his partner staring at him dazed and open-mouthed.

The reading of those medical journals, however, was destined to have great and far reaching consequences. The first and most immediate was a development of symptoms of endocarditis, myocarditis, aortic regurgitation, valvular inefficiency and other diseases of the heart and circulatory system.

The second and more obscure consequence was a trip to New York with all expenses paid and the receipt of a permanent, annual income.

Gabby knew but little of the laws of subconscious influence, of mental suggestion of self hypnosis. He had never had any serious ailment, had never consulted a physician, and was, in his own opinion as "sound as a nut." Within two weeks from the time he had mastered the general meaning of the two articles he had become a physical wreck, dying of heart disease and afflicted with various synovial troubles. He was firmly convinced that he had but a short time to live, but he didn't whimper, and stood his shift in the mine uncomplainingly, even though he felt certain the exertion would result in an early death. He did not recognize that his condition was a consequence of his reading any more than he could anticipate that the trip to New York with all expenses paid and the perpetual annuity would also result from his reading.

"SQUINT" BARRY walked back through the swaying observation car of the limited as casually as though he were merely a train-weary tourist seeking to lighten the monotony of the long journey by tramping through the train. There was about him an air of well-groomed success which spoke of prosperity, although an intangible something suggested a certain deadly hardness, a hardness of character. One sensed that his success had been a remorseless, driving success. A casual observer would have classed him as a young, urban business man who was swift in his decisions, remorseless in his operations.

In one respect the said casual observer would have been correct. Barry was remorseless. He had killed a watchman on his last little "job," had wounded a harness bull so badly that the policeman would never walk a beat again, and now, as Squint Barry swayed through the observation car, he had almost dismissed the entire matter from his mind. The incidents of the crime, such as a murder or two did not concern him in the least. There were but two things which caused him any concern. One was to keep his ill-gotten gains, and the other was to escape arrest.

He had left fingerprints on that last job and that had been bad, a tactical error, so to speak. And then the shooting of the cop.

Such circumstances had conspired to cause Squint Barry to head west in a hurry. He would leave New York State until the matter had blown over. Having made his escape across the Mississippi, there was not a chance in a thousand that he would be apprehended. His disguise gave him just enough of an appearance of respectability, of substantial prosperity to cause the officers to refrain from interfering with him. He appeared just the sort of a man one would expect to find travelling on the limited.

Hence it had come to Squint with somewhat of a shock that fate had betrayed him. For, when he had strolled into the buffet car he had happened to casually glance into the inquisitive eyes of Bill Benson, a New York detective. Bill had probably boarded the train at Tucson and was cutting the desert dust with a long glass of cold lemonade. He had knitted his brows when he saw Squint Barry, which was both a favorable and an unfavorable sign. Had Bill recognized Squint, he would have maintained a perfectly expressionless pose of bland serenity, but would have worked a hand toward his left armpit and suddenly exploded into action. On the other hand, had there not been something familiar about Squint's appearance, he would not have knitted his brows, visible evidence of a subconscious searching of the memory files.

Those fingerprints had indeed been a fatal mistake. The identity of the man who pulled that last bank job was as well known to the police as though he had left his calling card and photograph. Unquestionably Bill Benson had received a bulletin. It was equally certain that his memory would be functioning properly by the time the lemonade had been finished, and then there would be action on that train and lots of it.

So it was that Squint Barry had managed to stretch and yawn when his eyes encountered those of Bill Benson, and by that stretch he had contrived to conceal a portion of his face. Striving to keep up the appearance of a bored traveller who was meandering aimlessly through the train.

Once through the vestibule and Squint Barry had increased his pace. By the time he had reached the observation car he felt certain he had a five or ten minute start on the detective. It would take Benson a few minutes to place him in his memory, and another few minutes to organize a search of the train. These would be very precious minutes, not to be wasted.

Squint Barry opened the door and walked out upon the platform, he sat carelessly upon the polished brass rail, then slid one leg over, swung out over the sand of the desert, and looked carefully ahead. The train was thundering along at terrific speed, but he thought it was commencing to slow a bit. Ahead he saw a single shack, a water tank, and a whistle signboard by the track. Now there could be no doubt that the train was slowing. Squint dared not be aboard if the train should come to a stop. He swung way out over the blowing sand and flashing sage, leaned far back and dropped, with a rush, from the side of the train.

His heels dug into the sand. His head came snapping forward with a jerk. His legs frantically tried to keep pace with his hurtling body, and then he sprawled out on the sand, rolled, turned, twisted, and became a tangled mass of flying arms and legs, rolling along in the great cloud of billowing dust which the train had kicked up.

The sand was soft, however, and Squint Barry was hard. He lay still for a moment, then arose, began to dust off his garments, and gazed after the train and sighed. He knew that there would be considerable activity aboard that train after a few minutes, but each minute added a mile to the distance. However, there were telegraph wires running along the track, and there was the possibility of the train even backing up. There was a certainty of pursuit in some form or other, and quickly. It was up to Squint to get busy, and to lose but little time in the process. His vanishing must be complete.

THERE was a rough road running diagonally toward the track, and along this road Squint saw an approaching horseman. The eyes of the criminal narrowed, and his well-manicured hand darted under the left armpit of his coat to make sure that the ugly, flat automatic was in its proper place. Then he started to walk toward the nearest part of the road. Horseman and fugitive, hardly bigger than two black spots on the desert, approached each other, and over all brooded the blue-black of the Arizona sky.

Doctor Willit drew up his horse in surprise.

"Why, hello there! How do you come to be out in this part of the desert? Did your automobile break down?"

Squint Dugan walked slowly toward the horseman. He made no answer.

Doctor Willit stared curiously at the man, took in the well tailored clothes, the pink skin, innocent of sunburn, the squinted, gray eyes, and suddenly found himself staring straight down the mouth of an automatic.

"I want that horse," said the man.

Doc thought swiftly of the gun which was in his saddle bag, wondered if this were all a huge, practical joke, and tried to smile. The man certainly looked like a man of property, a respectable citizen, apparently an Easterner, one who had journeyed to the country by rail or machine.

"One more second and I'll bump you off," announced Squint Barry. "Get your hands up in the air and get off that horse."

A physician must needs be a keen student of psychology, and Doctor Willit recognized a subtle something in the tone of that voice which made the cold chills run up and down his spine.

"Look here," he said, "I'm a physician, and I've travelled far and fast on an important call. There's a child dying five miles from here, and I've come as far as I could in a machine and am completing the trip on horseback. I don't know who you are or what the trouble is, but I'm on an errand of mercy, so just let me go on and we'll forget all about having met—"

Something about the attitude of the man caused the doctor to suddenly throw himself to one side, and, as he did so there came the wicked spat of the automatic and a steel-jacketed bullet whizzed through the air where his head had been but a moment before. Upon the face of Squint Barry there had appeared that swift hardness of look which characterizes the swaying head of a striking rattlesnake.

Doctor Willit, his face grown suddenly pale, threw up his hands.

"Don't shoot!" he yelled.

Squint Barry moistened his lips and sighted down the barrel with his glittering eye.

"I should a' had yuh right between the eyes. Get t'hell outa there an' be quick. I'm likely to run short o' shells or I'd plug you right now."

Ten seconds later and the outlaw was astride the spirited horse, and the doctor was standing in the hot dust of the road.

"I'm goin' on," announced Barry, "an' don't be in too big a hurry about follerin' me. I'm likely to change my mind an' croak yuh anyway."

With that he rode off, following the dusty road across the desert, too wise to head back in the way the doctor had come and take chances on some observing traveller noticing that the powerful, black horse had changed riders. He was headed for the distant mountains which loomed silently purple against the brazen horizon.

Behind him, Doctor Willit lowered his hands, his face darkening in anger.

"The cur! The dirty cur! A child is dying and he condemns it to death. He would have shot me had I not read the expression of his eyes."

Lowering his head, the thoroughly enraged medico, began to plod down the road, his feet plumping in the thick sand, the sweat pouring from his forehead. Following not the criminal, but intent upon completing his call, responding to the cry of affliction regardless of the cost to himself.

AHEAD, Squint Barry was clinging to the horn of the saddle to hold himself steady. He had never been on a horse before, except once when he had, as a boy, ridden a pony in a concession. He was, however, determined and muscular, and the horse was a splendid animal, well broken, easy-gaited.

With one hand on the horn of the saddle and the other clinging to the back, Squint turned to take a survey of his new found possessions. He located the saddle bags with a flask of whiskey, a canteen of water, some lunch and a pistol, and grinned at his good fortune. The black bag of surgical instruments and emergency medicines which was strapped to the back of the saddle meant nothing to him. Squint had educated himself by dint of much violence, and his education included proficiency in a number of activities. He could soup a safe with the best of 'em, and he was particularly proficient with a sand bag, but he could barely read, and his writing was confined to signing his own name. He was a cold, hard customer; cool and alert, remorseless, ignorant, illiterate, yet cunning. His was the wisdom of the animal, the instinctive knowledge of the snake. Reading had no place in his curriculum.

After half an hour a small ranch loomed before him, a place where there was some water trickling through dark-banked irrigation ditches, where a few green things grew, and where a little house reflected the rays of the beating sun, a stable in the rear, an alfalfa patch and some sorry looking trees.

A man was standing in front of the house, and, as the horseman came pounding down the road, the man ran out with waving arms.

"Thank God, you're in time, Doc!" he exclaimed.

Squint Barry took a quick look around. The man was tanned, hard, a bronzed specimen of efficiency. There were horses grazing in a little corral. There might be another man, perhaps more men gathered within that house. To have shot this man down and started toward the hills would have been to invite pursuit, pursuit that would be wise to the ways of the desert, mounted on fresh horses.

Squint Barry sighed, and clambered awkwardly from the horse.

"You ain't Doc Willit," stated the bronzed man, puzzled.

"I'm his assistant, Doc Barry, come out from the East. Willit couldn't come so he sent me," explained Squint Barry, pausing in mid-stride, his right hand loitering near his left armpit.

The rancher nodded.

"I'll put your horse up, Doc. The kid's inside."

"Just tie that horse to the fence there," directed Squint. "We can put him away later, an' I want to get some things from the saddle after I take a look at the kid."

The man nodded, tied the horse and followed Squint into the house.

At first Squint was not sure of himself. He could hardly see in the dim light of the shaded room. It was close in there, and there was the stench of fever, the foul air of the sickroom, closed in in an attempt to shut out the burning sunlight. And it was hot in there. Although the temperature was a few degrees cooler than the air of the desert, it was a muggy, fetid air, without life.

Rapidly his eyes became accustomed to the gloom of the room, and he made out a white form lying on the bed, tossing and turning, babbling in the throes of delirium. Beside the bed sat a woman, a heavy, placid woman who looked at him with great eyes, sad, patient, trusting. Her skin was greasy, her posture one of extreme weariness.

"Ain't you got no man here beside yourself?" asked Squint casually of the rancher.

"Just the wife and myself's all that's here," announced the man. "We've been sittin' up in shifts until we're both most played out. Mandy, this is Doc Barry, he's come from Doc Willit."

The woman tried to smile.

"Thank God. I ain't dared to hope you'd make it in time. I been prayin' all day. It seemed an age since we sent the message, an' Jim had to flag the limited to send it in, too."

Squint Barry made no direct reply. He was sizing up the room, noticing the coiled rope which decorated the wall, trophy of some rodeo, some notable cast. He noticed, also the guns which hung on pegs from the wall.

"Just the two of yuh here all alone?"

"Just the two of us," said the man.

"In that case stick 'em up—high!" ordered Squint as his hand made a swift flicker of motion and the automatic leapt into his hand.

When he had tied them up he made a search of the room for money. Surely these people could not depend upon a bank. If they had any money it must be somewhere about. He finally found it in the bed of the sick child, and the only notice he paid of the little one was when he had to thrust the child over against the wall in order that he might search the mattress.

The man and woman watched him in wide eyed horror, an expression of stupefied bewilderment giving place to one of futile rage.

"But you'll have to let us loose so we can wait on the child," moaned the woman.

Squint glittered at her.

"You're damn lucky I don't bump all three of you off," he said, "an', believe me, if I hadn't found this roll I'd sure have made things hot for the kid until you came through an' spilled me the information. So long."

With that he was out of the door, once more astride the horse, and working his way up the ever climbing roadway toward the hills, hills which loomed more distinct as the sun began to descend and the cool purple shadows take the place of the heat glare.

"Once in those mountains an' the dicks can start all the sheriffs in the world after me," boasted Squint to his horse, as he began to press him to a smarter pace up the road.

At length the road came to an end at an abandoned ranch house, and from there on stretched the broad, smooth surface of the desert, a surface that contained a rather well worn trail cutting its way directly toward the mountains; and Squint pressed the horse up this trail. He could now clearly see the slopes of the hills, the jagged crests of the higher mountains, and he could distinguish high up on the side of the first range of hills a little something that looked like a scar, a scar that had a minute, black hole near the top of it. Squint was not accustomed to shafts and dumps, but concluded that he was looking at what might turn out to be a natural cave. It was a place which seemed to afford shelter as well as an unobstructed view of the surface of the desert, and he made up his mind that he would rest there for a few hours before pressing deeper into the hills.

WITHIN the little cabin which had been knocked together from shakes, old odds and ends, pieces of packing cases, wooden boxes and a few pieces of galvanized iron, Gabby Hicks was bent over a rude stove which had been made by the simple expedient of placing a piece of sheet iron over an open, stone trough in which blazed a small fire. The smoke was conducted outside of the cabin through a rude chimney and the smell of frying meat filled the room. Over on the back of the iron a teakettle sent forth billowing steam, and a teapot near by gave off a delicate aroma.

The little door which had been swung shut, banged open, and Sam Swift stood peering into the cabin, his huge bulk blocking out the afternoon light.

Gabby looked up, his watery, gray eyes blinking from the smoke, a fork in his hand, grease on his face.

"Ready?" he asked. "I thought yuh was goin' to clean out after that blast. I hadn't expected yuh for ten, fifteen minutes yet."

Sam raised a mud-stained, clawlike hand to his head and clutched at the straggling, matted hairs, seeking to curry them into some semblance of order.

"I come out to tell yuh, Gabby. She's done pinched out on us slick an' clean. There's been a pinch, an' then a fault on top o' that, an' there ain't nothin' more left o' that vein than an icicle in summer time."

Gabby's face did not change its expression, but his eyes blinked swiftly a couple of times.

"Well then, we're wiped out. We ain't hardly got enough for a stake. We ain't got enough to last us until we can locate something else. It's too bad, she was goin' so good an' gettin' richer all the time, until she commenced to pinch out on us. An' then this fault, somehow I sorta figured she was gettin' ready to fault on us the way that rock looked this noon."

Sam deposited his weight on an empty box and tried a smile.

"Oh well, Gabby, we're old, an' we've been cleaned out before, an' we ain't starved to death yet. We can jerk the rest o' that venison, take up what we've got left an' maybe swing up around that San Andemas country, takin' a look at some dry placer stuff. Me, I'm fed up on this business of followin' rock into the side of a hill an' then havin' it peter out on yuh."

Gabby nodded.

"Sam, mebbe yuh better get another partner. I don't want to be a burden on yuh this last time, an' so I been holdin' up my end, but I'm feelin' mighty poorly, and I reckon my heart ain't goin' to stand for much more real hard work these days."

"What!" exclaimed Sam in alarm, eyeing his ancient partner.

And just then there came the scrambling sound of hoofs, and a faint nicker, the noise of feet hitting the ground, and Squint Barry stood in the doorway.

"I'm hungry," he announced, "and I smelled that cookin' an' thought I'd drop in an' see if you'd sell me a meal."

The old men looked at each other askance.

"Sell hell!" exclaimed Gabby after a moment, he being the one who was usually elected to take the conversational lead with strangers. "Hell's bells, stranger, where did yuh ever come from that yuh figger a man has to buy his food when he comes on other human critters that are ready to sit down an' eat?

"Plant yourself on one of those boxes an' hitch up to the table, an' dig into some of this here venison that I done ketched myself. She's plumb prime, an' when yore teeth sink into it yuh'll recognize that she's cooked, an' cooked right."

Sam nodded and worked his way toward the door.

"I'll take care of your cayuse," he said. "Whoa, there, whoa now! Blessed if yuh didn't just get off an' leave him, an' he's headed for home. Whoa there, now!"

He vanished into the twilight, and from down the trail could be heard the sound of his voice, raised in entreaty, in command, in threats. At length he returned, and his beard wagged mournfully.

"Stranger yuh done been plumb careless. I guess yuh ain't used to this country much. That cayuse of your'n started for home right now. He's a Bar Square hoss an' he won't quit until he hits the home ranch which is twenty miles. Yuh had a black bag on the back of the saddle, too. What be ye, a doc?"

Squint nodded absently, his mind racing through a variety of complications. He had grub in those saddle bags. In the horse he had a means of transportation. He sensed that he would stand but little chance against mounted pursuit now. Also that fool horse would go on back past the cabin where he had left the man and woman tied up down past the railroad, right slap into the man from whom he had taken him. All in all, it was not a bright prospect.

"Well, there ain't no use passin' up nice cooked venison because a hoss is back trackin' on yuh," philosophized Gabby as he slid a tin plate of venison, beans and flapjacks on the table and handed a battered spoon to his guest.

"Yuh see we ain't much on style here. We cook the flapjacks thick in the mornin' an' cook enough to last as bread through the day. We have to work in the mine an' we don't have such a lot of time for cookin'. Just take an' dig in, an' make yourself t'home. When you've finished yuh can tell us what brings yuh out this here way, an' is there anything we can do to help yuh out. The nearest cabin back there is seven, eight miles where Bill Porter an' his wife hang out, them an' a kid—a sweet little cuss, too. Yuh must have passed them if yuh came up the trail road from the Bar Square."

Squint Barry nodded again, and was glad of the opportunity to keep his attention on his plate. Somehow, he sensed that the questions which were being asked were prompted by more than idle curiosity and that these old men would prove a big nuisance before he had lied his way out of there.

IN SILENCE he gulped his food, his mind commencing to grow a bit panicky as he thought of the probability of pursuit coming up the trail. It was dark now, and they would have a hard time following him in the dark, but if the detective had doubled back with a posse he would probably have located the man he had set afoot, together they would have gone up the road and found the house where he had taken the money and tied up the two old folks, and the posse would then come tearing up the trail toward the hills. Squint had felt he had time to stop and eat, and then he had intended to be on his way, trusting to darkness to get him far up in the mountains where they would never find him, where he could spy out over the country and head either back toward the railroad on the other side or into some settlement where he could secure an automobile. His ignorance of the vast wastes of the desert was stupendous, and he held a great contempt for all police. It needed no detailed knowledge of the country, however, to show him that he had made a serious blunder now, to convince him that he stood but little chance afoot with a mounted posse on his trail.

"Yuh must be in the office with Doc Willit?" suggested Gabby in a half statement, half question.

Squint nodded again. Not to answer questions would be to get himself in trouble.

"Say, look here," he suddenly confided, pushing back his plate, "there was a call came in that a fellow was hurt way back here in these mountains, some ten miles farther back. He has a broken leg, and his partner came in with the message. He said it was in a little valley back in the mountains where there was a spring and a cabin. Is there any place back here that you fellows know of that answers the description?"

The two old men exchanged glances, and Sam's gnarled hand clawed at his beard.

"I guess he must mean Miner's Flat, Gabby."

Gabby blinked his eyes.

"I reckon, but the other trail would be shorter for that, an' it's fifteen miles from here if it's an inch, but I don't know of no other cabin back in these here hills."

Squint heaved a sigh of relief. He had run a bluff and seemed to have struck a live lead.

"I want you fellows to take me back there. You've got horses or something?"

"Principally somethin'," said Sam.

"Say, Doc," ventured Gabby, hitching closer to the visitor. "We got a mine down here, an' I been down in that mine off an' on for a coupla years, an' Doc, I got a little synovitis down there in that mine."

Gabby paused hopefully. He would show the doctor that he was dealing with an educated man, one who could actually give a diagnosis of his own trouble.

Squint scowled.

"I ain't up much on ores," he said. "I guess it's maybe good stuff if you say it is."

There was a silence. Sam clutched at his beard and scowled. "Whatever are yuh talkin' about, Gabby?"

Gabby was surveying the visitor with hurt, watery eyes.

"An' I got a little endocarditis," he went on, stumbling over the syllables, "quite a bit of en-do-car-dit-is."

"May be all right. I'm not a minin' man," remarked Squint, his mind on the problem of getting transportation from these two hill billies.

"An' some my-o-car-dit-is," supplemented Gabby.

Squint arose, irritably.

"Well, what t'hell do I care if yuh have? It ain't my mine. Yuh don't want to give it to me, do yuh?"

Gabby had hoped to secure medical treatment, free advice; had hoped to astound his partner with his knowledge of medical terms, to see an expression of bewildered surprise come over the face of the doctor. Instead he felt much like a college graduate who tries out his French in Paris for the first time.

"Hell's bells, yuh old four-flusher, them's names o' diseases I got. What kind of a doctor are yuh?"

The irritation in Gabby's voice was directed more at himself than at his guest had Squint but known it, but the outlaw suddenly realized that this old man had the goods on him. He had been careless, had assumed that the old man was talking about ores. Not knowing just how much Gabby knew, but realizing just how thin was the ice on which he was skating, Squint determined to take time by the forelock, and suddenly swept the table to one side, jumped back and flashed his hand beneath his left armpit.

Quick as he was, he was not prepared for the swift efficiency of the old desert rat. Gabby had become just a trifle suspicious, and the look which had flashed over the face of his visitor just before the table had crashed to the floor had given Gabby a chance to collect his thoughts. His gun was outside, on his saddle. He had killed the deer two days ago and had left the gun and saddle in the shady side of the cabin. In that hot, dry climate there was but little necessity for caring for firearms, and the gun was used as a means of stocking the larder rather than for defense.

Gabby swept the oil lamp crashing to the wall and ducked.

A stabbing spurt of flame roared through the darkness, directly where his head had been but a split fraction of a second earlier, and there followed the vicious spat of smokeless powder as the small calibre, steel-jacketed bullets crashed from the gun.

Gabby made a dive for the door, got

through into the night, and then heard the sounds of a struggle, the crunch of a blow on bone, a moan, and then the triumphant voice of his visitor.

"That'll teach you not to be so damned smart."

A FIERCE rage took possession of Gabby. The damn dude had killed Sam, probably by smashing the end of the pistol down on Sam's bald, unprotected head as he made for the door.

Between the two old prospectors there was a bond of affection which was the more binding because it was hidden under a veil of rough badinage. Gabby determined that the man would pay with his life for the death of Sam Swift, and stumbled through the dark, picking up the six-gun which hung on a belt from his saddle horn, placing himself in readiness to carry out the execution of his sentence.

As he picked up the gun he also encountered a ball of twine which had been thrust in the saddle bag.

From the house there came a hail.

"Listen, you old fool. I'm coming out of here and head into the mountains, and I want your burros and I want you for a guide. Now are you going to surrender or will I have to put out your light?"

There was a confidence in the tone which came as a surprise to Gabby.

"Why dang yore old smart-aleck hide," replied the irate prospector, "I'm goin' to nail your hide to the side of the wall of this here cabin. You ain't got nothin' to talk about when it comes to surrenderin'. I'm out here where I can cover that cabin, an' when I get ready I'm goin' to rake her fore an' aft with lead."

Squint's voice suddenly became as hard as nails.

"Oh no you're not. You're out in that little flat place where there isn't any cover, and you haven't a light. When I get ready to sneak out of this cabin you won't even see me, but I'll be able to tell where you are and fill you full of lead."

Gabby thought for a minute. Undoubtedly the other could leave the cabin whenever he desired, but locating Gabby was another matter unless—Gabby cursed a bit under his breath. Beyond doubt the city man had an electric flashlight in his pocket. He could get behind a log or a pile of rocks and start sweeping the country with the flashlight with one hand and shooting with the other.

"You see I've got a flashlight," said Squint, as though reading Gabby's thoughts, "and if I want to take the time to cash in your chips I've got a cinch on it."

Gabby thought the situation over. He wasn't sure just how much he could count on getting a shot at the first beam of that flashlight which would strike home. The chances were pretty slim, shooting in the dark that way.

And then Gabby remembered a trick of night fighting he had learned from the Indians. It had been years since he had had any occasion to use it, but:

"Well, let me think it over a minute," he said, and swiftly gathered up the ball of twine and fastened one end to the saddle horn. Noiselessly he felt his way through the darkness, unrolling the twine behind him, sneaking past the door of the cabin, some twenty yards away.

When he had got well past the door, he worked back and began to tighten the twine until he had it stretching some three feet from the door and about waist high. He held the twine taut with his left hand, and placed the barrel of his pistol along the taut line, holding the weapon so that it was pointed with almost mathematical precision, straight down the path of that cord.

Down in the valley he noticed a light, thought he heard the sound of a faint whinny, but he was too busy to notice these things very much. His senses were all alert, his mind concentrated upon the door of that cabin.

"Hurry up," snapped Squint Barry, growing impatient. "I could have killed you by this time, and been on my way. Are you goin' to give in or not?"

Gabby gave the line a good tug to make sure that it was firmly fastened, and then shouted his defiance.

"Go on, you damn, murderin' coyote. I ain't ever surrenderin' to you or anybody like you. Come on outa that cabin an' I'll blow the daylights outa you. Yuh done killed my partner, an' I'm handin' it to yuh straight that I'm goin' to let huge chunks o' daylight through yuh."

A low, mocking laugh was his answer.

A minute passed, two minutes. Overhead the stars were partially obscured by drifting clouds, a cool, mysterious night wind whipped down the steep slope of the mountain. There was the faintest possible rustling of the branches of sage and greasewood. From the cabin there came not a single sound.

And then, suddenly, there came a tug at the line.

With that tug, Gabby's gun spat fire, the bullet tearing straight through the dark, following the line of that cord, against which, somewhere in the darkness, the form of the outlaw was pressing.

Again and again the revolver belched forth its deadly roar. Here was no vicious spat of small caliber, smokeless powder, but the good, old-fashioned, deep-throated roar of a forty-five, the heavy belt-gun of the plainsman.

AFTER four shots had been fired and there had been no reply Gabby held his fire. There were two more shells in his gun, and he would need those in the event of a charge by his adversary.

There was nothing. No sound came to his ears beyond a faint, gurgling groan. Gabby tightened the string again, and found that the body was still against it. In fact it seemed to have fallen over on the string, for the angle was greater, and the cord seemed to have been anchored to the ground.

Confidently, Gabby advanced, his revolver held at ready, and when he was within a few feet of the point where the string was fastened to the ground, he struck a match.

In the first faint flicker of the light he knew that he had nothing more to fear from the man who had sought to kill him, and he went into the cabin, found the extra light, struck a match, lit it, and then bent over the form of Sam Swift.

"Thank Gawd," he muttered. "His dome was so slick an' shiny that the gun barrel glanced off. He's out for a while, an' the scalp's torn, but there ain't none of the bedrock caved in."

He pulled and tugged, got his partner straightened out on the floor and poured a glass of water over his face. Whereupon Sam stirred, opened his eyes and sat up.

The first words which emerged from the old prospector's mouth were such that a pious observer would have despaired of the old reprobate's soul, and Gabby heaved a sigh of relief.

"Yeah, yuh durn fool. If yuh insist on gettin' yore head under gun barrels you're goin' to have headaches; but thank Gawd yuh woke up cussin'. I know you're all right now. It was the time the timbers caved in an' I pulled yuh out an' yuh was prayin' when yuh come to that I was scared. An' I sure had a hard time pullin' yuh through that trip."

Sam ceased his profanity.

"Where is he?" he asked, struggling to his feet, his gnarled hand to his aching head.

"Out yonder," said Gabby with a jerk of his thumb. "I ventilated him. Let's go see what he's like."

Together they took the light and went to where Squint Barry was lying.

He had evidently emerged from the cabin with his face away from Gabby, and the bullets from the prospector's gun, following the taut string had all taken effect in the man's right side. They were within a foot circle, and the blood was coming forth in a slow, welling stream.

"Git him in an' git his clothes off," said Gabby. "We may have trouble over this here pilgrim yet, an' we better find out somethin' about who he is an' what he was up to before he cashes in his chips."

They got the outlaw into the cabin, stripped off his clothes, bound up the wounds, and then Gabby looked at the yellow, leather money-belt.

"Hey, lookit here," he remarked, and forthwith began to abstract one-thousand-dollar bank notes. "My gosh! Lookit this pile the bird was packin'! . . . Hello, he's come to."

Squint Barry flickered his eyes, cursed weakly, and snarled.

"How did you happen to do it?" he asked.

Gabby laughed.

"I used an old Indian bullet guide," he said. "If you're goin' to come out here in the desert an' start makin' gun play you'd better learn the rules of the game."

Squint wagged his head and moaned.

"I'm cashin' in," he said, "an' I'm one man the cops never was able to corner. I've got 'em lookin' for me everywhere an' I laugh at 'em."

With that he began to detail his numerous crimes, boasting in the face of death, telling his startled hearers of murders, robberies and lesser crimes in short, matter-of-fact statements, giving names, dates, places.

In the middle of the recital the door burst open and a crowd of men came into the room, guns held at ready, their faces grim.

Gabby looked over his shoulder.

"We got him, boys. Come in an' listen, an' shut up."

Foremost in the crowd was Doc Willit, who hastened to the side of the cot, examined the wounds, and then reached into the black bag which he was carrying.

"He'll live if we can keep him quiet," he announced. "I can stop this bleeding, and then he'll stand a good chance."

With the words Squint Barry clamped his lips together and refused to make another statement. While Doc Willit worked over the man, Gabby and Sam Swift interviewed the members of the posse, learned how the New York detective had recognized the man on the train, had missed him by a matter of minutes, had organized a posse and taken a loose engine back down the track, had picked up the trail of their man, had followed along the road, of how they had overtaken Doc Willit at the home of Bill Porter, waiting on the infant, assuaging the fever with the medicines which he had recovered from the horse, which had found its way back to the road. Of how they had followed the back trail of the horse, had seen the flashes, heard the firing, surrounded the cabin and broken in.

Bill Benson grinned at Sam Swift as the doctor was dressing the prospector's scalp wound.

"You fellows have got a cinch," he remarked. "There's close to fifteen thousand dollars in reward money out for this fellow, and there's another reward of ten per cent. of the money recovered, and that's going to run pretty well up. We had a lot on this fellow, but some of the crimes he told you about are unsolved mysteries as far as the police are concerned. That's the first intimation we had that Squint Barry was the one who pulled them. You'll have to go to New York and testify to what he told you, and you'll have to go there to collect the reward money, anyway."

SAM looked at Gabby and Gabby looked at Sam.

"Gosh," muttered Gabby, "an' here we was thinkin' we was plumb broke. Fortune's wheel sure does do some rapid flops. What are we goin' to do with this here money, Sam?"

"We're goin' to Paree, France," promptly replied Sam. "When I'm out all alone in the desert I always think of Paree, an' I made up my mind if I'd ever get a strike that's where I was goin'."

Bill Benson laughed.

"There's where you birds are both wrong. You're gettin' along in years and I'm goin' to buy you one of these annuities, so you'll have a steady income to depend upon every month."

Gabby shook his head.

"Son, you don't know us. You can buy an an-new-itee with what's left if yuh want to, but when Sam gets his head bust tryin' to collect rewards we ain't goin' to deny him his wishes, an' besides, that sounds sorta attractive to me, too. You take half of it for this here income business, but me an' Sam is goin' to Paree with the other half."

Gabby grinned toothlessly about him, then proceeded to the door of the shack.

"What's more, I'm rollin' up this here string to keep to remember the occasion by."

The members of the posse looked at the blood-stained string in amazement. "What's the idea?" asked Benson.

Gabby shook his head.

"That there is a bullet guide, an' I can't tell yuh no more about it 'cause she's one of these here professional secrets we have —an' I tell yuh somethin' else. If I'd really had myo-car-dit-is, an' endo-car-dit-is, an' a-ortic re-gur-gi-ta-tion, I wouldn't a' never stood all this excitement."

And then Gabby laughed at the look of wide-eyed incredulity which appeared upon the face of the city detective.

The Trivials of Western Trails

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

TOURING means day after day of an aggregate of what seem like trivial incidents. I am at this moment writing in my automobile in the edge of the High Sierras, with Rock Brook rippling by thirty feet away, the vanishing glow of the new moon beyond a ridge which I can see when I switch off my converted spotlight, and two nice trout hanging in a shrub over by the stream which my companion, "Big Jim" Harriman, is going to eat in the morning, if my new oil stove works right.

We arrived here after a 215 mile drive out of Antelope Valley where last night we made our camp on a sidehill, with the auto headed down grade. The motor was cranky and the starter wasn't working right, so we proposed to give it a boost with gravitation in the morning. And all night long the canvas flapped, the wind blew and the car shook. Big Jim on his folding cot and I in my genuine home-comfort bunk in the sedan slept perhaps two or three hours from 8 last evening till 6 this morning. A cup of coffee, after some fine peach butter on rolls out of our supplies, somehow kept us wide-awake all day, not noticing our weariness. And tonight we old fellows had each a quart of milk and a can of crackers for supper—than which there is no better evening meal.

Tonight, an hour before sunset I jointed up my pretty, light fly rod, strung on two flies—a Cahill and a Black Gnat. The leader was too dry, for it split and as I tried to soften it for a re-tie it broke and I lost the flies. So I put on a Queen and a Yellow Spinner. With these I tried California trout for the first time. In 1923 I had caught a few trout in the Rockies—but using worms for bait. I had not caught a trout on a fly in years.

The ripples flashed the sun; the flies vanished from my sight, so that I was mourning the passing of a skill which had been mine. But in ten minutes a little of my old cunning returned. I leaned and peeked and crept about—a lifting flit in a tiny rapids and on the instant I recognized the work of a little trout's tail.

Hard-fished water, fresh tracks of men who had gone down at intervals during the day. I could expect nothing. But a nice one, a quarter of a pounder, came and I snatched him. Then a little farther downstream, I felt a solid tug. Missed him! I marked the place by the set of the current and depth of the water and moved along. When I returned I gave a most careful cast, skipped the flies with the current and up the trout came again. And I snatched him. Nearly half a pound, an odd brightly spotted brook trout, showing the effects of different waters and a sharper sunshine. I stared at him, surprized to catch so nice a fellow where many had fished before me.

My course is through regions which are to local residents quite commonplace. Coming up Owens Valley today it was not quite plain whether we should see "something" or not. We did find at certain points along the Los Angeles aqueduct men with good rifles waiting for blasters who have been blowing up the water supply, claiming the city is taking for its hundreds of thousands of people water which is needed for cows and fruit trees and such.

When one goes as a stranger into novel terrain the things which strike the eye so emphatically make the native sigh with discontent. He knows them too well. But if I preserve my curiosity alive and in good, active condition, it is impossible for me to grow weary with my environs. I have heard a feud-fighter, who had been shot at thirty-five times the day before, and who was to be a fugitive from justice for doing some meannesses—killings—on sundry bad friends of his, sigh at the regularity and monotony with which bushwhackings were happening to him. I had a list of fifty or so gunfights thereabouts. The natives preferred peace—but with honor, and honor at any price.

Complete Novelette

A Story of the Haitian Hills And the Dread Rites of the Obeah

CHAPTER I

SAM DIGROUT was sprawled drunkenly across a table in The Duke's Palace when he first heard of that strange giant called "Man-No-Can-Hurt." Yes, more than half drunk was Circus Sam Digrout, but a broken description of the remarkable negro who had established a reign of superstition back in the voodoo-ridden hills of Haiti had almost sobered him. Into his little red eyes there had flashed a gleam of cunning, of avariciousness; then he had suddenly straightened his huge, fat body and flailed out with both fists.

The Duke's Palace squatted near the edge of Port-au-Prince, Negro Republic of Haiti, out toward the palm-leaf "shops" where matches were sold in packages of six and a single orange or an empty tin can was a large purchase to be haggled over, where pewter coins rarely added up to value of a whole cent. It was a foul dive, foul beyond words; of all the tough resorts in the capital of that primitive isle of the Caribbean, and there were many of them, The Duke's was the lowest. Mulattoes, the aristocracy of the island, did not patronize it; even the *griffes*, three-quart black, ignored the place, while the score white Europeans and Americans the city of thousands of blacks shun it like a pestilence, knowing its dang For although rum was very cheap in t den, it almost seemed that human life cheaper, and filth and disease were distr uted without the asking.

Except for a few befuddled derelicts Sam Digrout, who staggered unknowin through its low door, blacks only patr ized the place. There they gathered drink enormous quantities of rum; th they forgot their native song and laugh and became fight-mad, shouting th slovenly, thick-tongued Creole which lost almost all trace of the original Fren

Giant negroes and weazened negro negroes whose bodies gleamed strong black as ebony and negroes who were shapen, deformed, dwarfish—many occasional women, crowded The Du Palace. Alike they were in the utter bl blankness of their faces and the tat which they called clothing, alike as th brothers were in the heart of the Con The air was heavy with their odor; hea too, with the smoke of cheap native

Devil Drums

By HOWARD R. MARSH

acco, the fumes of liquor and the acrid mell of perspiration and wet hair. Candles flickered fitfully, their yellow light ailing to drive the shadows from the orners of the dingy room where drunken erelicts snored and grunted and groaned. Voices roared maudlinly along the native ahogany bar, glasses crashed to bits, great sts beat on the wood and on faces with runken abandon. Occasionally full-roated laughter sounded but more often was a bellow of rage.

No Sunday-school was The Duke's lace, down toward the water-front of ort-au-Prince; no fit place for an Ameri- n, even a rough, coarse American like rcus Sam Digrout.

He had been quite drunk, of course, hen he plunged into that low-ceilinged n, and all during the long rainy after- on he had become drunker, slumping his ge body lower and lower across the box ble as the raw rum and occasional hiskey, more expensive to obtain but ore potent, piled up in cumulative effect. he blacks who crowded the place shunned n, even while they watched him with lling eyes in which gleamed childish riosity and simple speculation concerning murder and robbery. A white island in a black sea, Circus Sam Digrout was, and, drunkenly, he began to resent his isolation.

"Say," he bawled, as a black servant banged a huge glass of rum in front of him, "let's have some company. Say, I need someone to talk to!" He swept his fat arm across the table, knocking the glass to the filthy floor and staring down at it stupidly. "Say, nigger, find me a coon who can talk American, will you? Maybe a black wench, eh? I wanta talk, you bet. I'm damned sick, I tell you, of hearing nothing but this bastard mixture of frog and coon talk! Get me someone who can talk Indiana American! Parlee Americanee!"

The negro servant showed his white teeth in a grin which was not mirthful and bowed. *"Si, blanck!"* he muttered.

A MOMENT later a gigantic negro rolled over to Digrout's table. He was kinky-haired, broad of shoulder, with the faintest suggestion of the mulatto in his color. He held himself, too, with the pride of a superior black in spite of the rags which only half covered his muscular torso. "Talk American," he rumbled.

"Good for you!" roared Circus Sam Digrout, making a wild motion to clap the huge shoulders. "Fine, old buck! Get a chair, a keg or something. Sit down! I wanta talk. Waiter! More rum for me and my friend!"

The negro crouched on his haunches and waited.

"Where'd you learn American?" demanded Circus Sam. "Stevedore?"

"I work one, two year on *Yankee Girl*, to New York and Baltimore; sugar and coffee," the negro declared succinctly. "My name Christophe Fantin."

"Christophe, eh? Named after the wild old emperor of Haiti, eh? The old high-roller. Well now, that's fine! Me, my name's Circus Sam. Yes sir. Known under every big top from York to Frisco. Me, I managed Splendora, the Abyssinian Princess. You betcha. And Spidora, too, half-spider, half-woman. And Elephantia, the fat woman, who weighed five hundred and forty pounds. Ten cents, a dime, the tenth part of a dollar to see her."

Circus Sam's voice rose, loud and raucous above the hubbub of The Duke's Palace, boasting in that foreign dive of his past successes in America. Many eyes, whites gleaming, rolled curiously toward him.

"Yep!" the American boomed. "I've managed some real freaks in my time, the world's best, and made some dough out of 'em, too. Great game, I'll tell you, giving the suckers stiff necks!"

Suddenly his voice dropped and he leaned across the table in a burst of maudlin confidence mingled with self-pity. "But they died," he blurred. "All died. Spidora, she got married and Splendora was buried in East Chicago where she was born and Elephantia, they had to build a special box for her. So now, Christophe, Christophe, old buck, I ain't got a freak left, not one out of the whole lot. And that's —that's why, old man, I'm down here."

The big negro nodded as if he understood and pounded on the table for more rum for which Circus Sam paid in silver, glaring suspiciously around him the while into black, covetous faces which watched his fumbling hands.

"Yep," he went on, "I'm down here looking for another freak. Fat woman, dwarf, half-monkey, half-man—anything to catch the suckers with. Say, the woo have been combed, back in old U. S. A, and there ain't a single A-number-one side-show exhibit left. So I dressed up an came down here, hoping to find somethin to knock the eyes outa the crowds. B since I got here, two weeks ago, it's do nothing but rain."

The huge Christophe flashed his whit teeth in a grin. "Very much rain," h agreed.

"Rain, rain," Circus Sam rushed o with drunken garrulity. "Hell's hinge how it's dripped! Nope, I ain't seen noth ing worth paying a dime to see, nothin worth taking back with me. And then took a sorta cold and had to have a drin or two. Yep, for ten days I've been figh ing a gosh-awful cold. Well, at night I' seen a few snakes and funny-looking a mals with pink heads and green eyes, b that was because I was trying to knock o the cold, you understand. Too many drink eh? They tell me there really ain't a animals on the island to speak of, th old Noah neglected it, and that sure su prised me. But say, old buck," leanin farther across the table, "you ain't hea of any queer kinda person, have you? three-legged idjit or a baboon-faced gi Me, I ain't much for two-headed calves things like that. Nope, I like my frea to be human things. Folks can go ov to Neighbor Brown's farm and see a fiv legged pig but they gotta come to me a pay a dime to see a Spidora. You do know of any queer-looking men or wom do you, Christophe, old buck? Say, t woods down here oughta be full of 'e what with the hook-worm and cross-bre ing and all. Speak up, Christophe, a tell me what my ears are aching to he about that freak of nature I came do here to get."

The giant black was silent a mom his eyes studying Circus Sam Digro the fat and flabby form, the florid fa criss-crossed with a network of pur veins, the little red piggish eyes, the che ered suit and the heavy gold chain wh shook on the fat abdomen. He even s veyed the bright tan shoes and strip socks and then raised his eyes again Circus Sam's bloated face.

"There's what you call Man-No-C Hurt," he declared, seeking to exp himself in words the white man could derstand. His eyes gleamed with the cunning of a precocious child. "Man-No-Can-Hurt. Back in the hills."

"Man-No-Can-Hurt," repeated Circus Sam, bewildered. "What in hell is the Man-No-Can—"

"Big man," explained Christophe. "Very big much man. Giant. Bigger me. He takes knives and sticks them in, so!" The black made a motion of stabbing himself, grinning to show it didn't bring pain. "Knives, sticks, pins, so! Stab, stab. No blood come, no holler. He can't hurt, can't sore? You understand? Obeah watches over heem. No one can hurt heem." He paused to see what impression his words had made.

Circus Sam stared into his companion's round black face, seeking signs of a lie. Already he was excited. His red eyes blinked, his fat fingers tugged nervously at his watch chain and he pursed his lips spasmodically.

"Honest to God?" he demanded. "Don't try no kidding on me, you damn' nigger!"

"Man - No - Can - Hurt," repeated the black sullenly. "I say so, I no lie."

"By gad!" cried Circus Sam, hunching himself upright. "Say, Christophe, old buck, if you're giving me straight goods, I'll have a gold mine. I've heard of people like that! Yes, sir. No nerves, no nothing. Some disease, mebbe. Frozen nerves or something, eh? Once I saw in a medicine show in Fort Worth a man who'd stick a hat pin through his cheeks and—say, where does this gazebo stab himself?"

"Here — here — here," explained the black, pointing to his arms, his legs, his side. "Here," indicating his face. "No can hurt."

"My Garden Plot!" shrilled the sideshow man, excitement surging higher. "Too good to be true! The Human Pin Cushion. The Man without Nerves, Ironica—and you can't hurt him! Step up, ladies and gentlemen, and push this knife into him. He don't bleed, he don't suffer! Try your hat pin, madam, and—"

Suddenly the voice of Circus Sam dropped. "Nope, it ain't true," he mourned maudlinly. "You damned black, you're lying to me! I'll show you, you charcoal devil!"

He lurched forward in a sudden surge of drunken rage, upsetting the table as he flung his fist at Christophe's face. Glasses and bottles crashed, the board chair was broken. Circus Sam lost his uncertain equilibrium and plunged to the wet floor, rolling over and over as he sought to regain his feet. Christophe had leaped back from the flailing fists and now he waited, staring contempt at the huddled figure down there in the filth and spittle.

FOR a second, silence reigned in The Duke's Palace, that strange, strained silence which presages disaster. A volcano ready to erupt that den was, a black volcano which was about to burst over Circus Sam, smother him, tear from him his clothes, his jewelry—his life. Blacks began to hunch forward, half-crouched, their eyes gleaming, eager for the loot from that flashy, dressy *blanch*.

The negro, Christophe, sensed the impending explosion and for reasons of his own suddenly determined to avert it. He straddled the helpless body of Circus Sam Digrout and whirled, a huge, threatening figure who faced the bar and shouted words in the native Creole. His voice rumbled and roared in command and plea, then his arms slashed out viciously. But the pack of blacks, sensing prey, pressed forward like vultures.

Christophe's fist crashed home with a resounding smack and a negro, wearing only a flour sack for trousers, pitched headlong. Another rag-garbed native followed, another, hurtling limply from Christophe's mighty blows to the floor, but the crowd was swarming over the lone defender of the white man now; by sheer weight of numbers they were smothering him, clinging to his arms, clutching his pillar-like legs. Apparently doomed, the gigantic Christophe was, and below him on the floor Circus Sam was doomed. The hubbub rose higher; glasses gleamed through the air around Christophe's head, a knife flashed in the foul air.

Calling on all his tremendous strength, Christophe flailed desperately and succeeded in clearing a small space in front of him, driving the attackers back for a moment. Instantly his hands sought the pockets of his tattered pants; they searched frantically and withdrew at last to hold aloft a shiny cartridge tied with human hair. It glistened in the gloom.

"Obeah!" he bellowed, waving the talisman in the murky atmosphere of The Duke's Palace. "Obeah!"

As if smitten by magic, the crowding blacks ceased fighting; slowly, sullenly, they backed away, their eyes fixed on that object in Christophe's hand. At last they reached the bar and Christophe, stooping quickly, put his big hand in the pocket of Sam Digrout, clutched a few silver coins and tossed them toward the frustrated blacks.

Instantly there was a wild scramble, during which Christophe gathered Circus Sam in his arms and lifted him as if he were a child. "Come," he said, steadying the tipsy man on his feet. "Come before you get kill. We go to Rose and René. They tell you of Man-No-Can-Hurt."

Circus Sam seemed to appreciate, vaguely, the fate he had escaped and acted slightly ashamed of his sudden rage. Obediently he stumbled toward the door, leaning heavily on Christophe. Under his breath he was muttering maudlinly:

"Man - No - Can - Hurt. Ironica - Who-Can't-Bleed. Stick him with a pin, ladies!" He hiccoughed once, then grinned up into the solemn face of the black. "Christophe, old buck, I guess mebbe you're giving me the straight dope, eh? Say, if you are, five hundred American dollars is yours the very day I get Man-No-Can-Hurt on board a boat for home. Yep, five hundred dollars. And mebbe more. Nope, I ain't got it with me, you betcha not. I don't carry it around into places like this; not when I'm drinking. But it's in that cage here they call a bank, waiting for you if you get me that nerveless bird, and you gotta do it."

Momentary disappointment flashed in the eyes of Christophe; almost instantly there followed that gleam of childish cunning and obvious greed.

"We go to Rose and René," he repeated. "They tell us how to find Man-No-Can-Hurt."

CHAPTER II

THE shack of Rose and René Mandeville seemed half-buried in the mud of an alley-street but its door opened quickly enough when Christophe knocked, admitting the negro and Circus Sam from the drizzling rain into a room which was almost as dark as night. Christophe muttered some words in the native dialect and a weazened old black, moving around like a shadow, answered sullenly.

"René and Rose not here," the guide explained to Sam Digrout. "We wait." He motioned to the only chair in the room, a red plush rocker stained with salt and water, a beachcomber's prize undoubtedly.

"Humph!" grunted Circus Sam, feeling something sinister in the place despite his drunkenness. "I don't like these dark holes. No sir. Too easy to murder a guy. These dark—"

He slumped into the chair, still muttering, and almost instantly his protesting grunts changed to drunken snores.

Christophe stared down at the flabby American and in his eyes the cunning hate of a tiger flared momentarily. Then he turned to the old servant. "Now, Sigo," he said in the native Creole, "I will go into the next room for a talk with René and Rose. Important talk."

The weazened factotum nodded and flung open a thick door. Light flashed into the black front room for a moment; there were sounds of voices, one dulcet, musical, the other clear, decisive, punctuated by the shrill chatter of a paraquet. Then the door closed again behind Christophe.

A moment later the old black servant tip-toed to the sleeping, sodden hulk of Circus Sam. His talon-like fingers touched the gold watch chain which rose and fell on the bulging, checkered vest. His mouth gaped in a grin of childish pleasure, revealing black stumps of teeth. He leaned forward, his gnarled fingers clutching for the throat of the white man, and cruel cunning flashed in his eyes. Suddenly Circus Sam stirred in his stupor and the little slave leaped away, cat-like, to the outer door, which he locked with a sliding bar. Crouching against the door frame he waited.

Old Sigo became impatient after ten minutes of inaction. He was just rising to his feet to sneak close to the sleeping American again, to feel the watch chain and decide if it were real gold, when a series of raps on the outer door caused him to whirl with ape-like agility.

"Tap - tap - tap, tap - tap," came the pounding, three long and two short blows. It was repeated, and there was something urgent, something desperate, suggested by the mere sound of knuckles on the wood.

Quickly, quietly, Sigo slipped the iron bar from its sockets and swung open the door. Out of the gray drizzling dusk two natives slid into the room. Black as pitch they were, bare of foot and almost bare of body. Their hands held together the rags which served as trousers and their muscular bodies shone dully through rents in their denim shirts. One of them was bleeding profusely from a jagged cut above his right eye, which gleamed ferociously. Animal-like, he shook his massive head to clear his vision and blood showered to the floor.

Sigo motioned toward Circus Sam who was noisy even in stupor and signalled for silence. Bare feet padded across the floor, stopped for a moment before a thing which gleamed gray on the north wall, then slid through the door into the inner room. The opening and closing of the door allowed a wave of sound, muffled voices, to surge into the murky room. Circus Sam stirred in his sleep, and Sigo moved close to him. But the American again relaxed suddenly, and Sigo, staring regretfully at the watch chain, crossed the room once more to the outer door.

Ten minutes later he lifted the bar again to allow the two natives to slip silently out into the growing darkness. The head of the black who had been wounded was neatly bandaged now, and each of the natives clutched some compact object tightly in his right hand. Low-voiced, they muttered something to Sigo; the old man nodded, grimaced, then shut the door, barring it carefully.

CIRCUS SAM DIGROUT awakened a half hour later under the shaking of heavy hands. His bloodshot eyes blinked uncertainly and he stared with utter stupidity into the black face of Christophe, who stood over him.

"Wake up!" called the huge negro. "Come on! Wake up!"

The big American tried valiantly to regain command of his scattered senses; he hunched straighter in the chair, shook the punishing hands from his shoulders.

"Quit that!" he grunted. "What's the big idea?" Circus Sam rubbed his eyes.

"You sleep," mumbled Christophe. "Wake now. Rose and René here."

"Oh!" Circus Sam stared in bewilderment around the little room, at the oil lamp which had been brought in while he slept and which smoked odorously, at the snake-like cracks in the walls, the rag of a rug on the damp stone floor. Across on the north wall in a niche in the mud plaster was a gleaming skull against which two bows of red cloth showed vividly. Circus Sam stared at it, rubbing his bloodshot eyes. Slowly his befuddled mind cleared. He saw over Christophe's big shoulder a girl, and behind her a man.

"Sure!" he called. "I'm awake." His eyes were fixed now on the girl as if they beheld an impossibility. "Rose, eh?" he demanded, and his tongue ran over his fat lips.

Beautiful, Rose Mandeville was, strangely, exotically beautiful. Her eyes were black, jet black, her skin the color of old ivory. The wildly flung tar brush of Haiti had apparently not touched her, for her luxurious hair showed no suggestion of kinkiness and a close observer could not have found the telltale yellow halfmoons at the base of her finger nails. Her features were small and regular, as delicately carved as a rare cameo, and her simple dress of print goods suggested the graceful lines of her figure, not the flat, angular slatternliness of the Haitian native, but the full curves of a white woman who had basked in the luxurious softness of the tropics. A strange mixture of the North and South she was, the intelligence and vivacity of the European, the full bloom of the tropics. Now her sloe-black eyes were fixed on Circus Sam and a curious smile played on her lips.

The American stared back, feasting his eyes on the girl's beauty. He claimed to be a connoisseur of women as well as freaks, and now he felt himself in the presence of a tropical Venus, a girl of unique beauty and personal charm. Only by obvious effort did he shift his gaze to the man in the background.

Sitting in a straight-backed chair with unnatural rigidity was René Mandeville. His sparse hair was white as paper, his face peaked and lined with suffering, but his eyes were aglow feverishly. It was as if the body of the man were dead, a hollow waxen shell housing only a mind which burned furiously and flashed fire from his eyes. About him was the indescribable air of one accustomed to command, of one who ruled by the power of will. If his thin face and straight lips suggested cruelty, inexorable determination, they suggested, too, infinite understanding and intelligence.

The flaming of the old man's eyes startled Circus Sam Digrout into words. "Well?" he mumbled, and again, "Well?"

The bloodless lips of René Mandeville cracked in a sardonic smile. "Monsieur René Mandeville," he announced. "And Mademoiselle Rose, my daughter. Monsieur—" He paused.

"Digrout," the American declared thickly. "Sam Digrout. Circus Sam to my friends."

"Monsieur Digrout." Father and daughter uttered the name together and old René added, "Very happy to see you in my humble abode, sir."

His English was precise, careful, with the nasal intonations of a well-educated Frenchman. "Christophe has told us that you seek the man he has named for you as the Man-No-Can-Hurt, that you offer five hundred dollars to find him."

Circus Sam grinned ruefully. "I was drunk then, I guess. Yes, drunk. I took in all that bunk about the nerveless guy. But now I'm sober again. Fairly so," he added.

"You mean you withdraw your offer?" demanded René Mandeville, his eyes fixed on Digrout's florid face.

The American forced a laugh and winced with the pain of it in his throbbing head. "I would give five hundred dollars, eight hundred, yes, a thousand dollars for such a freak as—as Christophe told me about. A man, I mean, that could run knives through himself. Gad, he'd be a gold mine. Say, in one season I'd clean up twenty, thirty grand on him. But now that I'm sober, fairly so, of course I ain't such a fall guy as to believe—"

"You are wrong," interrupted Mandeville *père*, "wrong if you think this—this Man-No-Can-Hurt, as Christophe has named him, does not exist. He does. I have heard many times of him, in the ruins of Castle Montclair, far back in the hills. Christophe has seen him. Probably Sigo has, too." He motioned to the little ape-like negro who was crouched before the door, then uttered a few rapid words in dialect.

Instantly the toothless old man leaped to his feet and began to chatter with the excitement of an aroused monkey. After a moment of the shrill torrent René Mandeville motioned for silence.

"Yes," he said, turning to Circus Sam, "Sigo has seen him; not once, but several times. He says that the Man-No-Can-Hurt runs a silver knife through his upper arm, through his thigh, so it sticks out the other side. He says many, many natives have seen him do the deed. Perhaps white men like myself have seen him. Yes, perhaps even I have seen him."

SAM DIGROUT pulled himself straighter in the red plush chair. "Bah!" he challenged. "Lies. You want my money, all of you!"

The eyes of René Mandeville flashed, then a veil dropped over them, film-like. "Yes," he said quietly, "We want your money. We all want it. Monsieur Digrout, I am poor, very poor. I am paralyzed below my waist. My daughter, the last of a family which once owned thousands of acres of sugar and tobacco land, has no dowry. Look at this room, bare of furniture, bare of comfort. We have nothing except the servant, Sigo, and Christophe, here, who comes to carry me from room to room."

As the old man spoke Circus Sam glanced about the bare room. Yes, he admitted to himself, the fire-flashing old devil spoke the truth; the place certainly was poverty-stricken. "But what is the big idea of that skull and the red bows?" he demanded aloud, pointing to the horribly white head in the niche. "Not a cheerful decoration, I'll tell the world."

René blinked rapidly. "Merely a—well, a talisman for my servants," he explained a little too rapidly. "But as I was saying, we are very poor. Frankly, I covet your money. With it I could die happy, sure that my daughter would marry as she should. Without it, I dare not die. Sir, I have been dead in body for ten years, but my will does not let me die; perhaps some day chance will give me money for a dowry for Rose; then I will die. Meanwhile I do many things, anything which will bring me money. Yes, I want your money. But in exchange for it, Monsieur Digrout, perhaps we can show you Christophe's Man-No-Can-Hurt."

The quiet seriousness of the old man impressed Circus Sam. He blinked his eyes toad-like. "If you're telling me the truth, Mandeville," he declared, "my offer stands, a thousand dollars, American, when I get the Man-No-Can-Hurt on board boat for home and the circus."

The old Frenchman smiled mirthlessly. "Ah, that's quite an undertaking, Monsieur Digrout; at least it seems so tô me, sir. For five hundred dollars I will give you advice which is worth many times that money, or for five hundred dollars I'll arrange so that you can see the Man-No-Can-Hurt. But as to capturing him, that, sir, is your problem and I take no responsibility in it."

"This advice," Circus Sam suggested scoffingly, "this valuable advice, what is it?"

Old René Mandeville stared at the flabby American intently a moment. Then his strange eyes seemed to soften. "I'll give you the advice free," he said. "It's this: Forget that strange man back in the hills. Leave me what you will for my good counsel, but go back to America."

"Now you're tantalizing me," Circus Sam declared. "Just trying to lead me on. Why should I forget this nerveless guy who'd make the greatest side-show attraction in existence?"

"Because," old Mandeville explained slowly, "you will be playing with death if you seek to capture him. Playing with death? No, courting death."

"Bah!"

"Truly, Monsieur Digrout. I know of what I speak. The Man-No-Can-Hurt is more generally known as a high priest of the Obeah. That, you should understand, is a form of native witchcraft, akin to voodooism and yet different. Perhaps Obeah explains the man's imperviousness to pain. Religious fanatics, you understand, often endure anything for show, or for power over their people. Many strange things are done by the native priests, the *Papa Lois.*"

The old man paused a moment while his eyelids flickered like the shutters of a camera. "Did you ever see a voodoo ceremony, Monsieur Digrout? Ah, it is well you have not. It is not good for sleep, seeing such a thing, nor good for the nerves. Horrible things are done; yes, it is all horrible, the beating of the devil drums, the incantations, the terrible sacrifices."

Old René Mandeville closed his eyes for a moment and his face worked spasmodically as if he were reviewing some horrible scene in his mind. Then his smoldering eyes flashed again on Circus Sam. "Yes. Take the advice of an old man who knows the terrors of this land and forget your quest of this freak, as you call him. It is good advice and worth much money."

Circus Sam hunched belligerently forward in his chair. "Say, you ever heard of the two American words, 'pep' and 'enterprise'?" he demanded. "Well, me, I'm just bulging with both of 'em and when I hear of an A-number-one prize like this Man-No-Can-Hurt I go after it. Yes sir. And now you've got me believing he actually exists. And mebbe," doubt creeping into his voice again, "that was your idea."

"Oh, he exists all right," René Mandeville declared impatiently. "Up in that old ruined French castle of Montclair. We—most of us in this room—have seen him perform. If you are determined, Monsieur Digrout, for five hundred dollars it may be that you can see him. I'll attempt to arrange it. As for capturing him, that, I have said, is your problem."

"Well, good American dollars will do a lot," Circus Sam boasted. "Particularly down in this damned country where two bits is a day's pay. And a tunk on the head will do a lot and chloroform will do more. Just show me that No-Can-Hurt bird and I'll figure some way to get him to America. You betcha! You see, that's the way I make my living." He smiled with a boastful cunning. "I've always been able to persuade any freak to do about as I say."

An expression of aversion flashed across the waxen face of René Mandeville, but he concealed it instantly. "In that case," he said, "I'll undertake to arrange the details of the expedition which will show you the Obeah practitioner, Man-No-Can-Hurt. For five hundred dollars, I say. But you understand now that it'll be dangerous to interfere, very dangerous, perhaps fatal."

Once more Circus Sam blinked; the danger did not worry him. He was thinking of the five hundred dollars. "Done," he said. "Let's quit talking now and get down to cases. Who'll take me and how?"

"Christophe will guide you."

CIRCUS SAM DIGROUT stared at the huge negro, then his little eyes turned to the girl Rose for a long moment, and finally shifted back to the father. "I don't care to go with Christophe alone. Nope. Too easy back in the jungles or the mountains for anyone to bump me off for the loose change I carry and my watch. Nope, you gotta come too, Mr. Mandeville."

"I? Monsieur Digrout, I have been tied to this chair for ten years. Christophe carried me into this room in the chair and Christophe will carry me out again."

The suggestion of a smile flickered across the fat lips of Circus Sam. Apparently he found the old man's words to his liking. "Well," he suggested, "then your daughter must go. Someone I can trust, you understand," he hastened to add. "Someone white. Mebbe a sort of a—a hostage, do they call 'em? Nope, I wouldn't feel safe with just a nigger along. I wouldn't start. But for five hundred dollars, Mr. Mandeville, you should be willing to furnish me good company and protection. Your daughter—"

"My daughter," interrupted René Mandeville, his eyelids jerking. "My daughter! But that's impossible."

"Then the deal's off," Circus Sam declared. He was bluffing, and bluffing well. He wished greatly for the company of that beautiful girl of the tropics, but he wished to capture the Man-No-Can-Hurt more. Now, however, he was playing his cards two ways. "Five hundred is a lot of money, Mr. Mandeville. Surely for that your daughter would accompany me as a sort of guarantee of safety." He turned to the girl and smiled at her with his little eyes.

Rose had been standing beside her father's chair and now she lowered her head and whispered in his ear. When she straightened she patted the silver-white hair affectionately. *"S'il vous plaît, papa,"* she murmured.

The old man was silent a moment, his strange eyes staring into space. *"Bon Dieu,"* he muttered at last, "it is well. For five hundred dollars we must risk much. And Christophe is to be trusted, and Sigo, too." He raised his voice. "Monsieur Digrout, Rose pleads to go with you. Yes, I will allow it, trusting you for a gentleman. But if anything happens to her through fault of yours, Monsieur Digrout, hell itself won't stop the torture which will be yours!"

Circus Sam gulped, feeling the cold threat of the old man's voice to his very marrow. "All right," he said. "She'll be O. K. with me. Now let's quit talking. I'm ready to start any time, the sooner the quicker."

"Tomorrow morning," René Mandeville declared, "you will come to this house with three hundred dollars in American money. You will give it to me and then the expedition will start. When you come back you will give me two hundred dollars more. Tomorrow at nine you'll be here with clothes for the jungles and hills. Christophe and Sigo and Rose will be ready with mules and supplies."

"All right, all right," declared Circus Sam impatiently. "I'll take a chance. I'll be here. But I've got a word of warning to add, too, old top! Any tricks from you, Pop Mandeville, and I'll—"

He pushed himself to his feet, his threat unfinished, and started for the door. His gait was still stumbling, uncertain, and his fingers fumbled with the bar lock, but his little eyes were saturated with an expression of cunning and excitement that was not pretty to see.

When the outer door slammed on the sound of the pit-patting rain and the slosh of Circus Sam's feet in the mud, the four people in the bare room, René and Rose Mandeville, Sigo and Christophe, stared into the eyes of each other and smiled enigmatically.

"Beast!" muttered old René, and his eyelids flickered like the wings of a white butterfly. "Beware of that man, Rose darling!"

"Oh, papa!" carolled the girl, running her fingers through the sparse, white hair. "Don't worry so much! I'll enjoy the excitement. And I'll be safe. Christophe and Sigo will take care of me. To say nothing of the Obeah!"

She turned toward the skull in the wall, gleaming under the red ribbons. Involuntarily the eyes of the others followed hers, staring at that horrible emblem.

CHAPTER III

OUT from Port-au-Prince, along the main highway of the Black Republic, went that little cavalcade on the strange quest of the being which Christophe had named Man-No-Can-Hurt. The weather had cleared and the road was teeming with market-women, most of them trudging along barefooted, almost hidden under the loads on their heads, a few of the more fortunate seated sidewise on small mules and balancing tattered slippers on their toes. A black river of humanity these women made of the highway, and breasting the current of them was a difficult task.

Christophe, huge and loud-voiced, led the way, sitting with unnatural rigidity on a raw-boned mule; he shouted and pushed a passage for those who followed. Next came Rose Mandeville, mounted on a little mouse-colored donkey. In spite of her ludicrous steed, her strange companions and the faded khaki uniform she wore, there was an air of regality, of aloofness, about her which Circus Sam, following on a second donkey close behind, feared even while he admired. Cold-sober Circus Sam was now, and at his best in appearance and deportment. Quite resolved, he was, to make an impression on that proud beauty who held her head so regally above the throng of black women.

At the rear of the cavalcade, sprawled on a mousy, flea-bitten donkey, rode Sigo, the weazened little negro. He chattered and sang to the three pack animals he led and which were all but buried under supplies. Occasionally his rolling eyes turned to Rose Mandeville and then he smiled evilly.

During those first hours on the road conversation was almost impossible, despite Circus Sam's efforts to be agreeable; a few words were shouted back and forth but the black river of humanitv, steaming along under the hot sun, drowned most sentences as soon as they were uttered. Sometimes Rose Mandeville, indicating a particularly ludicrous sight among the market-women, turned to Circus Sam and smiled with her great jet eyes and curving lips. Then Circus Sam Digrout forgot the discomfort of the donkey's gait and felt desire and admiration for the beautiful girl surge through him with ever-stronger force. Yes, he had succumbed to her beauty.

At first the American strove to urge his mount to the side of Rose Mandeville, to smile and talk to her, but the girl's cool manner and aloofness, as much as the opposing pressure of trudging market-women, drove him back, swearing under his breath, to his place in the line. There he consoled himself with the idea that there would be better chances ahead; chances to exhibit his wealth and flashiness, his stock of boastful anecdotes and experiences, that personal magnetism he felt he possessed.

At noon Christophe led the cavalcade abruptly from the main highway and the great crowd of blacks. He turned at a bridge and followed the shallow river bed which meandered toward the distant mountains. Now the party was in a region of stones and ugly, thorny vegetation interspersed with abandoned cotton and tobacco fields, a desolate region where once a French irrigation system had produced untold wealth. The river bed was black and rich, but on either side rose barren hills of red-brown dirt. Occasional ruins, overgrown with brush and the abode of lizards, bats and owls, showed where the French *entrepreneurs* had lived their sumptuous lives in the days of prosperity. Among the broken walls and overgrown courtyards here and there negro families clustered, staring out at Sam Digrout's expedition with childish curiosity.

Christophe pointed at one of the ragged rock piles and called over his shoulder to Circus Sam. "Place like that," he shouted, "is where we find Man-No-Can-Hurt."

"Humph!" grunted the American. "How much farther?" He was very lame from the jolting of the mule, soaked from the hot humidity of the river bottom, hungry and impatient.

The white teeth of Christophe showed in a grin. "Up there," he said, motioning with his big hand to the great hills of rusty red which rose ahead. "High up. Tomorrow maybe we be there."

Rose Mandeville saw the expression of discouragement which flashed across the face of Sam Digrout. "We'll stop for lunch," she announced, pulling her donkey out of the river bed and dismounting under a great cathedral-like clump of cocoanut palms. She issued instructions rapidly in Creole to Sigo, and the little ape-like negro leaped to obey, chattering and grinning toothlessly as he prepared the frugal midday meal from the packs of his beasts and often smirking in that strange manner at the girl.

Food cheered Circus Sam considerably and the attention which Rose Mandeville paid him cheered him more. Once when the girl was passing him a piece of sweet bread his hand closed over hers and he stared meaningly into her black eyes, but the girl smiled with cool politeness and removed her hand gently. Ah, he was hoping now, was Sam Digrout, hoping to win the girl's love almost as much as he hoped to find the high priest called Man-No-Can-Hurt, but he had begun to realize that he must move slowly to his conquest.

WHILE Sigo was in the midst of re-packing his beasts of burden after lunch he stopped suddenly, rigid as an ebony statue, one hand raised in a signal for silence. Down from the hillside rolled a throbbing, as if some gigantic heart were pounding in its great shell. Louder and louder the pulsating sound welled, until the wet, sticky atmosphere seemed to vibrate deafeningly; momentarily it faded almost to silence, then the boom of it increased again in barbaric tempo and violence.

"Tom-tom!" whispered Christophe. "Devil-drum." He had reached behind him and from the back of his tattered shirt produced a short rifle, which explained his unnatural stiffness during the morning's ride and which he now examined and tested carefully. From a pack of blankets he drew two old, rusty revolvers; one he gave to his mistress and then offered the other to Circus Sam, who accepted it doubtfully.

"*Cacos?*" asked Rose Mandeville, her black eyes flashing with excitement.

"Yes, most like," Christophe agreed.

"What the devil are *cacos?*" Circus Sam questioned, fingering his revolver uncertainly. "Sounds like something to eat."

The girl smiled momentarily but quickly her face sobered again. "Bandits, you would call them, outlaws. We are in the *caco* district now, Monsieur Digrout. There are thousands of them in the jungles and hills, ragged, disreputable natives, ready to pounce on market-women, travelers, cattle herds, even to attack villages. Poor *cacos!*" Pity and understanding welled in the girl's black eyes. "They don't know any better. They think they can free Haiti from foreigners, think they can make their own particular general a new president of the republic."

"But why in the devil don't the authorities clean 'em out?" demanded Circus Sam. "Our marines and—"

"Oh, they try hard enough! But the hills are high, the jungles dense, and the *cacos* are very, very many. So we must be careful, Monsieur Digrout. The *cacos* are very dangerous."

"Are they armed?"

Again that suggestion of a smile flashed across the girl's expressive face. "They think they are," she explained. "Rusty swords, machetes, old pistols which will barely shoot, amulets called *wangas*, for they are followers of the Obeah and voodoo. Ah, but now a few of them have rifles and modern revolvers. They are the generals; they are the ones to fear. If you see any native with a weapon, shoot to kill, Monsieur Digrout. That is the rule here; that is why Christophe carried his rifle in the back of his shirt, lest he be shot for carrying weapons. Remember, shoot first and ask why later! That is the rule."

"A hell of a country," grunted Circus Sam, leveling his revolver at an imaginary black. His pudgy hand shook, perhaps the after-effect of his prolonged debauch, perhaps because of the nerve-wracking "*pom-pom-pom*" which throbbed down the river valley.

"We go!" muttered Christophe. "Watch like owl! *Caco* country, yes."

Onward the party started single-file, slower and more cautiously now. Christophe, leading the way, avoided half-submerged rocks whose clatter might betray the party and dodged brittle vegetation; his eyes rolled right and left, searching the dense foliage; he paused often to listen. Gradually the infernal beat of the devil drum receded into the distance; then a new and more awful sound arose. Loud it was in the heavy air and close at hand, the terrible wail of a woman. Ahead in the trail stood an old native, almost naked, shrieking and tearing her hair as if she were in the throes of physical agony.

Christophe, his short rifle ready, rode rapidly forward. When he returned he explained with obvious excitement that the woman had just been robbed by *cacos* of the little basket of yellow oranges which she was carrying on her head to market. Rose Mandeville, nudging her little donkey forward, soon allayed the woman's stark tragedy with a few pewter coins and then conversed rapidly with her in Creole.

"She say the *cacos* left her but a few minutes ago," the girl informed Circus Sam. "Hundreds of them. But that may mean six or a dozen. Anyway, she surely has been robbed and the *cacos* are nearby. We must be doubly careful."

Circus Sam had lost all pretense of cheerfulness now; he was jumpy, morose. Behind every tangle of foliage, each trunk of breadfruit or mango tree he imagined he saw a black body or gleaming gun. The little cavalcade was climbing rapidly upward with only occasional dips into jungle valleys. There the walls of greenery were so thick, so impenetrable, so dripping with water that almost no light came through. Snake-like creepers entangled the legs of the mules; wild hogs squealed occasionally and ran into the thickets. Here and there giant lizards moved sludgily aside. Always the air seemed more oppressive, heavier; always the trail became more and more impassable. At times the weary riders were forced to dismount and lead their animals through tangled, dank greenery.

Once the mules stumbled over vaulted piles of stones, half hidden by creepers, a sinister place, heavy with the air of mold and decay.

"An old cemetery," explained Rose Mandeville. "The stones are piles to keep the hogs from the bodies. The natives believe the voodoo spirits will attack them if they are allowed to escape from the bodies of the dead."

Circus Sam Digrout shuddered. That little cemetery, without crosses, without headstones, the overgrown and dank abode of lizards, seemed the epitome of the whole barbaric country which had grown so fearsome to him.

"This is a trail for pigs, not men," Christophe rumbled when the cemetery had been left behind.

"Hell's bells, let's stop then!" ordered Circus Sam. "I've got enough. Let's rest."

Again Christophe pointed ahead. "Close here lives man I know. For few centimes he give us his house tonight. We stop there. Yes. Two, three miles. Not more. Very soon we be there."

But it was not a matter of miles the weary cavalcade was to travel that day; within a bare hundred yards catastrophe overtook the expedition which sought Man-No-Can-Hurt.

Christophe was leading the way into one of the infrequent clearings along the river bed, a natural amphitheater formed by a cluster of dense mango and breadfruit trees with their scalloped leaves, when a shot rang out with startling suddenness. There was a thud, a single cry of pain and the gigantic negro clutched wildly at his right shoulder. For a breath he swayed in wide arcs on the mule's back, then his rifle thudded to the ground. After it, like a top-heavy doll, tumbled the great Christophe, crashing to the earth. A black tower of human flesh, he fell.

For a moment he squirmed with pain in the ooze and dank vegetation and his face contorted horribly, while the others watched him with fear-stricken eyes. Then, by obvious effort of will he leaped to his feet and staggered forward, weaving from side to side. Unarmed he was, but high in the air he held the glistening cartridge wrapped in human hair which had saved him in that den of Port-au-Prince known as The Duke's Palace. As he tumbled out into the clearing he bellowed an incantation of which the word, "Obeah," was the only one coherent.

"*Cacos!*" called Rose Mandeville leaping from her donkey into the tangled flora beside the trail. "*Cacos!*"

For a long moment Circus Sam remained motionless on his donkey, paralyzed by the turn of events, then he pitched himself head-foremost into the dense vegetation. After him piled Sigo, tugging fiercely at the halter of the lead pack-animal and muttering excitedly in a strange jargon that was more animal than human.

A moment later there was utter silence there in the brush except for the buzzing of myriads of insects and the gasping breath of Circus Sam Digrout. Suddenly the creepy stillness was shattered by the staccato bark of a gun. One shot, two shots, a single bellow of agony or petition, then again silence reigned in the dense jungle where a beautiful girl, a white man and an ape-like servant listened to the pounding of their own hearts.

CHAPTER IV

TO ROSE MANDEVILLE, crouched in the dense foliage beside the jungle trail, to Circus Sam Digrout and Sigo, the old black servant so like a monkey, the minutes seemed like hours following that wild charge of Christophe into the clearing ahead, a charge made with only an amulet of the Obeah for a weapon and which had apparently ended disastrously with the twice-repeated crack of a rifle.

For aught those three knew a band of *cacos* was even then creeping up on their place of concealment, awaiting the proper moment to leap in and murder their prey with the simple brutality of their natures. Rose Mandeville appreciated, if Digrout did not, that torture and mutilation were the probable penalty of capture; she had her revolver poked through the green curtain of vegetation, ready to defend herself to the last. Sigo was crouched at her feet, his wrinkled old face bent to one side, listening, listening with the acute senses of the native black.

Of the three, Circus Sam Digrout, the blustering American, seemed most helpless. His nerves, frayed by the ten-days' debauch in Port-au-Prince, now seemed too taut to endure the strain; ready to shout maudlinly, he was, to leap forward and charge that jungle clearing ahead whence three shots had issued, followed by that single wild bellow of the charging Christophe, and then—terrible silence.

Rose Mandeville appreciated the state of funk which had crept over Circus Sam; she saw the trembling of the revolver in the man's hand, the beads of perspiration on his round face, the strained look in his little eyes. She pitied him vaguely in that moment of terror, instead of feeling contempt for him; she understood, apparently, the battle he was having with his nerves and she reached across to touch his shoulder reassuringly.

"They're mostly cowards," she consoled him in a whisper. "Maybe they've fled already."

It was patent that the girl did not believe her own statement, and Circus Sam shook his head. "If only they'd do something!" he choked. "This waiting to be killed is awful!"

As if in answer to his prayer, a cry rang down the trail. At the sound of it Rose and Circus Sam clutched at each other, utter incredulity showing on their white, tense faces.

"Hi, there!" came the hail. "Come on! It's all jake!"

Through the hot dampness of the Haitian jungle came those words, typically American, and typically American, too, was the clear, strong, masculine voice which shouted to them.

"Come on up!" the hail was repeated. "The war's over!"

The two, Rose Mandeville and Circus Sam Digrout, pushed their wondering faces through the foliage, while little Sigo began to caper and dance before them like a grotesque ape.

Striding down the trail they saw a tall man, his rusty-red hair glinting in the sun, his head thrown back to repeat his call of welcome. His face had been tanned by the tropical sun, yet he was undeniably a white man. His khaki uniform, faded to a gray-white color, showed vividly against the green vegetation. Knee-high leather boots, a felt sombrero, tilted back on his head, and a wide, knife-girdled belt completed his costume. Across his arm he carried negligently the automatic rifle which had spoken so viciously to Christophe.

"Gendarme!" shrilled little Sigo, pirouetting and leaping his joy. *"Bon Dieu!* Gendarme!"

The man paused at sound of the negro's voice, then stared unbelievingly as Rose Mandeville, beautiful as a forest goddess, stepped from her concealment, followed by Circus Sam Digrout who suddenly felt as limp as the steaming leaves around him.

"Gendarme!" repeated the girl, pleasure and relief flashing from her black eyes as she hurried forward. "A marine! Monsieur Digrout, an American marine!"

"Not quite, mademoiselle," corrected the uniformed man, drawing himself up with a click of his heels. "An ex-marine, mademoiselle, at your service. Jerry Gates, former corporal of marines, and now, by grace of God and hard work, the owner of a plantation consisting of jungle growth and weeds."

"Sherry Gates!" carolled Rose Mandeville, and she lingered happily over the mispronunciation, relishing it. "Sherry Gates!"

EX-CORPORAL Gates grinned; his blue eyes danced under the battered sombrero. In a subtle manner he seemed to reach out and enfold the girl instantly in a web of good humor and understanding, an immediate camaraderie. "Sherry it is then, Mademoiselle of the Jungle."

"Mademoiselle Rose Mandeville," the girl explained, extending a small hand with a man-like gesture. "And this is Monsieur—Mr. Sam Digrout." This time she lingered on the "gr" sound, making of it a veritable growl, then laughed gaily. Suddenly her mood changed; across her face flashed anxiety and pain.

"But Christophe?" she begged. "Where is Christophe? Did you—was he killed?" Her eyes watched the face of Sherry Gates to read his answer before his tongue spoke. When the man smiled, her face, too, lighted like a burst of sunshine through gray clouds.

"No, but it was a close call," Sherry Gates said. "I thought he was a *caco,* of course. They bother me a-plenty, the murderous pests, stealing everything I leave out and taking a pot shot at me once in a while. Lucky for me, their old guns and paper-wrapped cartridges won't shoot straight beyond fifty yards, but at that they've given me a few souvenirs. Lately they've begun to believe I bear a charmed life and don't attack me so often. But your man with his gun in front of him—I was sure he was one of the brutes and let him have it. Then when he charged, waving his Obeah *wanga,* say, I just pumped a couple more shots at him. One of them creased him and he toppled. I was just about to end him up when he shouted some American words. Well, I was careful, I tell you, until I crawled to him and he told me about you all down here—an American man and a 'petite mademoiselle'."

The ex-corporal bowed to Rose Mandeville and smiled with his attractive blue eyes. "Now we ought to get back to your—your Christophe? It takes two deaths to kill a native so he'll be all right, but we can make him more comfortable. Mademoiselle Rose, will you accept the crude hospitality of my shack for the night?"

"With much pleasure, Monsieur Sherry! Let's go to Christophe, *vite.*"

The girl led the way along the trail, her little figure an embodiment of elfin grace to which was added that self-reliance which was so strangely regal. Close to her, his eyes alight with pleasure, strode the tall, rusty-haired ex-marine, eagerly explaining the little plantation he was wresting from the jungle wilds, here an embryonic irrigation system, there the beginnings of a sugar cane field, beyond, a crude cane-crusher fashioned from a sapling and a stump. As he talked, Sherry Gates stole glances at the girl and his eyes filled with wonder at the beauty of her.

"Lord, the first white people in six months!" he exclaimed. "Can you blame me for being talkative? Plenty of blacks! Blacks, blacks, blacks! Rolling eyes and gleaming bodies in the jungle, behind every bush it seems sometimes, market-women, loafing men, sometimes *cacos!* And at last a white woman and man. It seems impossible!"

"But why then do you stay?" demanded the girl.

Back went the shoulders of Sherry Gates and he grinned, a hard grin without mirth. "Because I have a thousand acres here which some time will be a wonderful plantation," he explained. "Marvelously rich land, plenty of water. All it needs is work. And if I last another three years up here, then I'll be fixed for life. That's worth enduring a little hell for, isn't it?"

Obviously Rose Mandeville, in her eagerness to reach the wounded Christophe, only half-heard the man's words, yet he rushed on with the exuberance of youth, proud of his handiwork, happy to show it to the beautiful French girl who had stumbled on his plantation in the jungle, emphasizing its possibilities, its beauties.

Circus Sam Digrout, toiling behind the two, realized that he was very much out of the picture. Lame and aching from the unaccustomed hardships of the day, mentally and physically limp, he was cursing the moment he had started on his strange quest for the Man-No-Can-Hurt. Through him surged an envy of those two youngsters ahead, followed by an unreasonable flare of jealousy. Already he half-hated the tall young American, hated his strength and courage, his masculine attractiveness, hated most of all the ease with which he had understood Rose Mandeville and made friends with her.

Christophe, it developed, was not seriously wounded. The first shot had bored through his shoulder, shattering his collar bone but missing his left lung; the other bullet which reached its mark had cut clearly across the negro's head above his ear, causing a wound which bled badly but was entirely superficial. When Sherry Gates and Rose Mandeville reached the center of the clearing, Christophe was already on his feet, pressing the aromatic leaves of some jungle plant against his wounds. He grinned ruefully at his mistress, who began to examine him solicitously.

"Heem *caco,*" the huge negro called, pointing at Gates. "Be careful of heem."

Rose Mandeville laughed with an infectious gaiety. "I see you aren't badly hurt, Christophe." Turning to Sherry Gates she added, "When a native can joke he's well enough; they ordinarily make such a terrible fuss over nothing at all."

The ex-marine shook his head doubtfully. "Maybe, sometimes," he consented. "But you have never seen a hundred *cacos* attacking an outpost. Lord, you have to kill the first ones twice, and even then they keep on coming—after they're dead, I actually believe—until a few of them fall, and then the rest turn and run like scared rabbits. You see, they think their *wangas* make them immune to bullets, just like Christophe here, charging on me. But come, it's almost dark and we must get ready for the night. Christophe, can you walk up to my shack?"

For answer, the negro led the way through the clearing to a little structure of logwood and thatch, *tache,* which was perched on a slight rise under a cluster of cocoanut palms. A flimsy affair, the house was, almost entirely open on two sides and with square holes for windows on the other two, yet Sherry Gates was obviously proud of its neatness and cleanliness.

"You will sleep here tonight, if you care to, Mademoiselle Rose," he announced. "I have another building down below, a tool shelter, that will do for Mr. Digrout and myself."

"Oh, but I hate to drive you from your home," the girl protested. "Let me sleep out in the open."

"And now, supper," Sherry Gates announced, ignoring the girl's protest. "I'll scurry around and see what I can——"

But here Rose Mandeville put down her little foot firmly. "We'll not eat you out of supplies," she declared. "Sigo will prepare supper from our packs. No, no, Monsieur Sherry, not a word! Now I'll go down to the stream and wash the dust away, while you carry your blankets to the shed I've driven you to, Sherry Gates."

SUPPER, prepared by Sigo and made more palatable by steaming coffee which the host brewed in an open fireplace, was a cheerful meal during which the girl and Sherry Gates exchanged experiences and anecdotes. Circus Sam Digrout attempted to edge into the conversation, relating fantastic tales of circus life in America, to which the other two listened courteously. But soon Rose Mandeville and the ex-marine unconsciously excluded Circus Sam from their interplay of wit and confidences. Then the American, sullen and angry, glared his jealousy and rising hatred of Sherry Gates. His little eyes stared at the moths and night insects which fluttered to their death around the flickering candles and he attempted to find a way to shift attention to himself, to break that spell of joyful camaraderie which had enveloped the man and girl.

"Say," he boomed suddenly. "Say, Gates, we're up here looking for a freak called Man-No-Can-Hurt. What d'you know about him?"

Sherry Gates turned quickly, startled from his mood of raillery. "Man-No-Can-Hurt?" he repeated. "Oh, I understand what you mean. So that's why you're here! Trying to catch a glimpse of that Obeah priest, eh? *Papa Loi,* isn't he?"

"Trying to capture him, not just see him," declared Circus Sam, belligerently.

Rose Mandeville turned quickly to their host. "No," she corrected, "I, at least, am not trying to capture the Man-No-Can-Hurt. My father agreed to help Monsieur Digrout find the strange priest, but father couldn't come and that's why I'm here. We hope, with the help of Sigo, to smuggle Monsieur Digrout into one of the voodoo ceremonies. Only we won't, we mustn't, try to capture the Man-No-Can-Hurt, not on this trip."

"I tell you we will!" shouted Circus Sam, his anger rising. "We're going to carry him away with us if money or guns are any good. I gotta have him! And I wouldn't make this trip again for all the money on this damn island!" He glared his defiance at his auditors. "Yep, we'll capture him right now or know why."

"Quiet there, quiet!" advised Sherry Gates. "The very leaves out here have ears. Quiet, I say!"

There was no doubting the gravity of the man's warning and Circus Sam subsided for a moment. Then, "But what I want to know, does the Man-No-Can-Hurt really live, or is he just a trick to get my money out here in the damn' wilds?"

"He lives," Gates declared quietly. "Yes, I've heard about him from the market-women as they go past—a black giant they say, who tortures himself with knives and might well be named Man-No-Can-Hurt. But Mr. Digrout, and you Mademoiselle Rose, I advise you with all my heart not to seek this high priest. *Papa Loi,* as he is called, is apparently in the very inmost circle of the Obeah or of the voodooists. You might see him; there's a bare chance of that. But it's dangerous, frightfully dangerous. The natives in their voodoo worship and witchcraft are in no mood to welcome whites unless it is to have one for a 'goat without horns,' a human sacrifice. You know that, Mademoiselle Rose. Take the advice of one who has lived in the jungle the last two years, one who thinks he knows the ways of the blacks, and give up this fool search."

Sherry Gates was appealing primarily to the girl, his eyes glowing with sincerity. "Please, Mademoiselle Rose, go back," he pleaded. "The consequences might be too horrible for words!"

But Rose Mandeville's head was up and she smiled coolly into the eyes of the earnest young man. "No, I promised father and Monsieur Digrout I would see this through," she declared. "We'll luck it out some way, but thanks just the same."

"Then I'm going with you," Sherry Gates declared with sudden decision. "Two tenderfeet like you in these jungles and hills looking for a native priest! It's ridiculous! Yes, Mademoiselle Rose, if you insist on going ahead, I go with you. But I tell you again that if you are wise you'll turn back before it's too late."

There was silence for a moment while Sherry Gates glanced from the girl to Circus Sam hoping that one of them would weaken in determination. But neither moved nor spoke and at last the ex-marine rose.

"Well," he said, "if we're starting on that wild goose chase in the morning we'd better get some sleep. Mr. Digrout, will you go with me to our room in the Ritz?" He grinned and pointed out into the darkness. "The beautiful tool shed lies down there. Mademoiselle Rose," he added, "station Christophe and Sigo, one on each side of the shack, and if you are frightened in the night, call. We'll be only fifty yards away. *Bon soir,* Mademoiselle Rose! Come, Mr. Digrout!"

A few minutes later Circus Sam, wrapped in a blanket, was staring into the darkness around him and vainly seeking sleep. His body ached, his nerves seemed to jangle audibly. From the night outside the little tool shed sounded many jungle noises, the death squeal of a rodent caught in the cruel talons of an owl, the beating of many wings, the drip and sough of the jungle, and once or twice it seemed, the pad of bare feet. Eerie, frightening, those night sounds were.

Suddenly to Circus Sam's ears came that strange throbbing, the beat of the tom-tom, the devil drum, deep in the jungle. It welled and pulsated in the heavy air, carrying a sickening fear to the heart of Circus Sam Digrout. Tempted to break into the pitchy blackness and run for it, he was, but he dared not move. In the morning, though, he'd flee back to Port-au-Prince, leave forever that awful country of devil drums and incantations, strange sacrifices and murdering *cacos*. Yes, he'd had enough of it all, he decided there in the nerve-wracking darkness.

While Circus Sam tossed and fretted in the little shed and Sherry Gates slept, black shadows moved in the brush. Very slowly, in absolute silence, they advanced, converging gradually on the shack under the cocoanut palms where Rose Mandeville slept. Back in the jungle the beat of the tom-tom ceased at last.

CHAPTER V

CIRCUS SAM was shaken violently from the fitful sleep which had claimed him toward morning. His mind still teemed with nightmares and visions and he struck out wildly with both huge fists as if to drive away those dreams.

"Quit that!" came the bark of Sherry Gates. "Get up! Quick!"

"Why—why—what's the matter?" Circus Sam was still in that nebulous fringe between sleep and consciousness. "What's the matter?"

"Rose is gone! Get up, I say!"

"Rose gone?" repeated the befuddled man. "Where? How?"

"In the night. Rouse out, you big fool!"

A thwack between the shoulders shocked Circus Sam from his lethargy. He sat up, blinking owlishly, then gained his feet and tottered after Sherry Gates who was racing back up the rise to the little shack.

"Don't get so damned excited!" called Circus Sam, his mind functioning at last. "The girl's taken her niggers and slipped away, back to Port-au-Prince. Her old man's got three hundred dollars of mine and now she's given me the slip."

"Think so?" demanded Sherry Gates bitterly. "Well, look at this!" He pointed to the interior of his shack, which was in wild disorder. Almost every object of value had been removed, every cupboard ransacked and emptied.

"Stolen you blind, too, eh?" Circus Sam crowed. "She and her two slaves! A couple of ninnies, weren't we, to be taken in by a girl like that?"

"I tell you Rose Mandeville didn't do it," Gates insisted angrily. "She's not that kind!" He stared anxiously at the disorder, seeking some clue to the girl's disappearance, then stooped suddenly to examine a great brown stain on the floor.

"Look!" he called. "Blood! Pray God it's not hers! And footprints, bare feet! Many of them. In the blood, and in the dirt outside. See, here they go!"

Rusty-red head bent low, blue eyes intent, Sherry Gates followed the tracks out of the shack and across the clearing. Suddenly he stopped for a split-second, then leaped forward to the edge of the brush.

There, half-hidden by the dense foliage of a mango tree was a limp black body, sprawled grotesquely—Christophe. From between the great muscular shoulders of the black a knife stood upright; his eyes were wide and staring, his face contorted with the final spasm of fear and agony. The gigantic negro had paid the final great penalty for loyalty to his mistress.

"Dead," muttered Sherry Gates, staring at that great body, once so strong and able, now useless forever. "Dead! Stabbed in the back while he slept and dragged here!" He turned slowly and faced the silent jungle, the sluggish river. Around his head a swarm of tiny insects buzzed and he swept them aside absently. "Rose! Rose, they have you," he muttered, and his voice sounded quite hopeless.

Circus Sam was fascinated by that huddled black body below the mango tree; his little eyes popped as he stared at it and his face was white and covered with beads of perspiration. Once again fear was master of him. "What'll—what'll we do?" he choked.

Sherry Gates whirled. "Do?" he shrilled, and his voice was brittle to the breaking point. "Do? We'll find Rose Mandeville, that's what we'll do. We'll find her if we bust trying, we'll find her if we have to kill every damned black in the whole country!"

"But take me back first!" pleaded Circus Sam. "Get me back to the highway. I don't want to mix up in this mess any more."

"Shut up!"

"Take me out safely and I'll give you three hundred dollars. Sure I will. Five hundred. Just get me out of here and—"

"Shut up!" repeated Sherry Gates whirling, his fist clenched. "Shut up and let me think. No," he corrected himself, "you run back to the tool shed and get our guns."

"But—" began Circus Sam.

"Run, I tell you, or, by God, I'll start the killing right now, on you!"

Before that fierce gale of anger Circus Sam wilted. Obediently he slunk back toward the tool shed, picking his way warily and watching each tree trunk, each bush, for possible attack.

When he returned Sherry Gates was awaiting him impatiently. "Come on," he said, "we'll beat it for the old Castle Montclair. Maybe we could follow the tracks of those kidnapping black devils through the jungle, but I doubt it. Anyway, I think our best bet is to get to that old rock pile up in the hills as quick as we can. That's where they'll take her."

"Castle Montclair?" repeated Circus Sam with a faint show of interest. "Ain't that where the Man-No-Can-Hurt is supposed to be?"

"Yes. The old ruins are the temple of native worship and there they gather, the damned voodooists and the followers of Obeah. Your bird you call Man-No-Can-Hurt is supposed to be there. But I don't give a damn about that now. The point is, ten to one, they'll take Rose Mandeville there as a sacrifice or for one of their heathen ceremonies. That's the only reason I can see for kidnapping her. They've got some horrible belief about sacrificing a white virgin, I've heard. We'll have to stop them, that's all there is to it. Come on!"

Head down, Sherry Gates swung through the tangle of foliage and brush toward the hills to the south. Behind him, hating to follow but not daring to turn back, panted Circus Sam. Suddenly a weird chattering noise stopped the two men in their tracks. Out of a dense wall of greenery leaped Sigo, the little weazened negro. Within a tenth-second of being shot he was; Sherry Gates' finger was twitching on the rifle trigger before he recognized the servant of Rose Mandeville. The fellow was more ape-like than ever. He capered and twisted, made wild motions with his hands; his face contorted, his eyes rolled. Ahead he raced and stumbled, then returned, only to charge forward again. And all the time an unearthly noise came from his loose lips.

"Crazy!" muttered Gates, wondering how the little negro had escaped the knife which had claimed the life of his companion. "But he wants us to follow him. Hurry, Digrout!"

Behind the insanely racing, chattering black plodded the two white men. Seeking the old ruined castle, the voodooists, Rose Mandeville, and, incidentally, Man-No-Can-Hurt; probably, thought Circus Sam Digrout, they were also seeking death in its very lair.

CHAPTER VI

ALL DAY the two white men and the ape-like little negro pushed their way forward toward the great hills to the south. Sometimes the walls of greenery were so thick, so impenetrable, that the sunlight barely came through. In other places were great clearings of red-brown sterile dirt and rock.

As they neared the hills they came again and again upon signs of the natives, occasional sounds of them. Once Sherry Gates whirled with an oath and his automatic rifle shattered the quiet. Close beside him a huge negro face and rolling eyes had appeared in the foliage; it vanished with the mystery of magic, leaving the two white men with the conviction that each step of their progress was being watched.

Just as fearsome were the horrible symbols of the Obeah: Here was the skull of a horse mounted on a pole and decorated with garlands of red cloth; there the entrails of a chicken or a dove hanging from a stark tree. Once a cross of red-stained wood hung squarely across the trail.

Dead campfires in the clearings became more and more frequent. At one of them Sigo stopped and dropped on his hands and knees. Through the charcoal and refuse he pawed until he found a glistening piece of black wood. Quite greasy it was, despite its charred condition, and it seemed to please the weazened negro for he came prancing forward, offering the charcoal to Sherry Gates, at the same time motioning with his hands. "Only black men can get closer to Obeah," he chattered in Creole.

"He wants us to blacken ourselves," Gates declared to Sam Digrout, who was panting and heaving breathlessly, glad of the momentary respite. "Well, it won't do us much good. Any native could tell we are white underneath, even if we were covered an inch deep with this stuff. At night, though, or at a distance, we might get by. Anyway, Sigo has his reasons. Let's hop to it."

Carefully, methodically, Sherry Gates blacked his face, his neck, his arms, even his hair and shoulders, then turned the charcoal over to Sigo for the finishing touches. The little negro carefully lined the rims of Sherry's eyes with the black wood and ground particles of it into his ears, then stood back and surveyed his work. Suddenly he pounced forward, so fiercely that the ex-marine thought for a moment he was being attacked by the insane little fellow. But Sigo merely tore at the white man's clothes, ripping them in great gashes until they were mere tatters. Then carefully he blackened the skin under each rent in the clothing. Finally, despite the protests of Sherry Gates, Sigo took the automatic rifle and hid it in a tangle of grass by the side of the trail.

"Don't like it," the ex-marine protested. "No gun. But I guess we've got to trust Sigo. You don't suppose he's double-crossing us, do you? He seems to know what he's doing."

Now the little negro turned his attention to Circus Sam and treated him in the same manner as he had Sherry Gates. Grunting, protesting that it was tomfoolery, that they were sure to be killed anyway, Circus Sam endured the indignities. At last, blacked and dishevelled to Sigo's satisfaction, the two white men were allowed to proceed.

It was almost dusk before the party fought their way through tangled creepers and brush to the floor of the red-brown hill at the top of which lay the ruined Castle of Montclair. There it stood, a huge pile of grey stone, looming over the landscape—a desolate place, sinister in its suggestion of evil. The weather-worn walls gaped in wide cracks which were overgrown with creepers and vegetation until the entire building seemed festooned with rank greenery. In a subtle manner the old rock pile seemed to be an animated old man, hairy and bewhiskered, leering with blind eyes, eyes that had once been windows in a magnificent castle but were now only black cavern-like holes similar to those in a skull. Through these openings bats flew in and out.

"There it is," muttered Sherry Gates to Circus Sam who was crouching beside him in the brush, staring with fascinated eyes at the old ruin. "That's where the voodooists and the followers of the Obeah gather for their unspeakable rites. The damn' place is quiet now, far too quiet to please me. Where's Sigo?"

Sigo had slipped silently into the rank vegetation and disappeared. Fearful, impatient, the two white men awaited his return, feeling strangely helpless there in the growing darkness of the Haitian wilds. Once they thought they saw the little negro zigzagging his way up the hillside far above them, but like a black shadow he flitted from sight.

NO SOUND came to the two waiting men; the silence seemed oppressive, threatening. Even the parrots had ceased their chatter at dusk and the monotonous hum of insects droned into silence. Fear lay heavy on the night.

"Damn!" muttered Sherry Gates at last. "It's sure creepy. If Sigo doesn't show up P. D. Q. I'm for starting up the hill after him. I don't like the way he took our guns and then left us."

"Check!" agreed Circus Sam. "Gates, for the love of heaven, let's get out of here! Let's put our heads down and run for it! It's dark and we'd stand an even break of making a clean get-away."

"Nothing doing!" Sherry Gates declared savagely. "I'm not forgetting that Rose Mandeville is in the hands of the damned blacks! What's more, Digrout, you stay with me! Understand! I may need you, so don't try any funny stuff!"

A few moments later, just as Sherry Gates was preparing to advance, Sigo returned. He approached so noiselessly that when he grasped Sherry Gates by the arm the ex-marine lunged out into blackness, swearing.

"Come!" Sigo ordered, tugging at the man's arm.

Sherry Gates obeyed, half-inclined to believe that he was being led into a trap instead of to Rose Mandeville and her black captors. Behind followed Circus Sam, frightened beyond words, a stumbling hulk of a man who followed the little black leader blindly. Up the steep hillside the two white men panted after Sigo, who seemed to have cat's eyes in the blackness, on across an ancient courtyard until the walls of the ruined castle loomed straight above them. Now their black guide paused momentarily, then dove into a tangle of vegetation.

Gates and Circus Sam Digrout stared at the spot where the little negro had disappeared. Almost hidden by a matted tangle of tamarind and grass was a narrow black hole which emitted a blast of cold, damp air.

"Here goes!" muttered Sherry Gates, grinning grimly, as he dropped into the opening. "Into hell with us!"

Circus Sam grunted; he was too wrought up to speak. Cautiously he lowered his great bulk into the cave-like aperture.

Sigo was waiting down in the hole, and now he groped his way forward, pulling Sherry Gates after him. Circus Sam followed, one hand clutching at the belt of the ex-marine. Through the underground passage the three went, stumbling over creepers and rotten timbers, slipping in the ooze, clutching wildly at walls which exuded a cold, slimy sweat. Rotting vegetation made the atmosphere heavy with the odor of death; the air was fetid, lifeless.

"Don't go so fast," panted Circus Sam. "Don't go—"

A warning blow from Sigo silenced him.

Suddenly the air in that underground passage became warmer, less heavy with the stench of corruption and decay, and the ground underfoot was firm. The three were in the cellar of the old castle now and Sigo paused, listening. Then, as if he had the eyes of an owl and could see his way in the blackness, he swung sharply to the left and through a crumbling stone arch. Just inside of it he stationed Sherry Gates and Circus Sam. Then, signalling for patience and absolute silence, the little negro slipped away again.

There in the dark, damp cellar of the ruined castle the two white men waited, one on each side of the crumbling arch of stone. Sherry Gates whispered once. "I don't like this," he said. "Damned if I do. I feel absolutely helpless . . . What's that?"

Both men listened breathlessly. Behind them in the darkness there was motion; they could feel it with that strange extra sense of mankind which detects the presence of another, even in an inky black hole. The motion ceased, began again, ceased. Some unseen being was undoubtedly approaching the archway.

"Horrible!" muttered Circus Sam. "If I ever get out of here alive I'll—"

His words were cut short by a terrific blow on the head which felled him like an ox. Simultaneously Sherry Gates was cudgeled. For a moment he swayed on his feet, horribly conscious of treachery, betrayal; then he pitched across the body of Circus Sam on the slimy floor and the blackness of the cellar crept over his mind.

CHAPTER VI

WHEN Sherry Gates and Circus Sam Digrout regained consciousness they were lying prostrate on the stone floor of a lighted room. Tight thongs bound their arms and ankles, cutting into the flesh. Around them the yellow light of torches flickered and smoked, drawing to them insects and bats which cut in black streaks back and forth through the foul-smelling room. Shadows loomed and danced; the smoke was acrid, choking, the air heavy with the odor of unclean human bodies. In their ears, above the throbbing of their aching heads, rang a chant which seemed to endure endlessly without varying its tone or changing its words.

Circus Sam, paralyzed by fear, and still half-dazed from that terrific blow on his head remained motionless, limp, but Sherry Gates raised his head from the floor and gazed around him.

The little room seemed a single hodgepodge of shining black faces, gleaming bodies, rolling eyes, whites showing weirdly in the flickering light. There they were, row upon row of naked blacks ranged around the walls, partially *cacos*, undoubtedly, partially peaceful peasants; and yet all voodooists. Except for a slight side to side swaying of their torsos in rhythm with the chant they were motionless; even their lips barely moved to emit the throbbing incantation.

Sherry Gates watched the strange scene, fascinated. Close at hand he saw Sigo chanting with the others, and he cursed himself for allowing that cunning little black to betray him so easily. That painting with charcoal, the tearing of clothes—a farce, all a ghastly farce to enable the negro to disarm the white men and lead them more trustingly to their doom. Probably Sigo had betrayed Rose Mandeville, too, into the hands of the blacks.

At thought of the girl rage surged through Sherry Gates—he'd murder that fiend of a Sigo—and he tugged furiously at the thongs which bit into his flesh. But the blacks ignored his struggles and the chanting continued; seemingly it was eternal.

At last one of the chanters rose and stepped forward. The flare of the torches gleamed on his naked body; it was of huge dimensions and strangely painted with white to represent a skeleton, and on it were many ridges of scar tissue. Evidently the giant negro was a high priest, *Papa Loi*, for the others watched him silently as he crossed the room to gloat over Sherry Gates, grinning horribly and showing an expanse of repulsive red gums.

"Ah, little one," he crowed in Creole, "we have been waiting for you. We watched you as you came and our messenger led you to us. It is good. The great God of the Green Snake is hungry for white goats without horns."

"Go to hell!" muttered Sherry Gates defiantly, tearing futilely at his bonds.

Circus Sam rolled his great head to one side. "What'd he say?" he choked.

"Don't know," Sherry declared. "Something about 'white goats' though, and that's enough. They're getting ready to boil us or fry us; make a nice fricassee, won't we? Pleasant damned thing to face, isn't it?"

Circus Sam groaned and shut his little red eyes tightly in a spasm of fear, but Sherry Gates remained with his head raised, a defiant spectator of the strange scene which was enacted in that foul, smoky cellar.

The high priest retreated to a corner of the room and returned with a chalice of beaten metal which was half-filled with red coals. He placed it in the exact center of the circle of blacks and over it he dropped two handfuls of dried leaves. Instantly the low-ceilinged room was filled with an odor which was intoxicating in a strangely-sweet, penetrating manner. Now the priest picked up a tom-tom and began to beat upon it slowly. After a moment of the throbbing sound a door creaked open, admitting a draft of cold air into the room. Now out of the shadows a beautiful black girl appeared, riding a goat and chanting in a nasal singsong. The animal had been scrubbed to a snowy whiteness and its horns gilded fantastically.

The protesting goat and its strange rider were led close to the chalice and the girl, *Maman Loi*, stepped over the smoking fire as she dismounted. She was clad in a single red robe with a great flaming feather in her hair. On her ankles and wrists bracelets gleamed and rattled. Sensuously beautiful and lithe, her features were regular and impassive, but her eyes glowed and rolled wildly.

Grasping the goat by the horns the girl raised its head and sang into the bewhiskered face for a moment. Then suddenly she whirled and seized the tom-tom from the priest's hand. Beating it in rhythm with her steps she glided around the room. Very slowly she moved at first, pausing often to gloat over the two helpless white men. Gradually the tempo of her drum and her dance increased. Faster and faster she moved, more fiercely she pounded the drum. Now she was whirling through the smoke-laden atmosphere almost too rapidly for the eye to follow. Her red robe trailed behind her like the tail of a comet as she spun from wall to wall. She whirled, she leaped, she pirouetted on her toes, beating the drum ever more fiercely.

A dance of passion, of hate, of wild abandon while pulses raced in that little room. Sherry Gates could feel his own heart pound faster in response to the beating of the tom-tom, and the effect on the blacks was awesome. Their faces were contorted with excitement and lust, their bodies jerked spasmodically. And still that girl whirled and leaped, always faster, tirelessly. Suddenly, with a burst of wild beating on the drum, she leaped to the center of the room, beside the white goat. From her body she tore the upper part of her robe, which became two red strips in her hands. Gracefully she stooped and laid the cloth in the form of a cross on the floor, then leaped back and forth, back and forth, over it. A knife appeared in her hand, gleamed through the smoke, slid across the throat of the white goat. The animal sagged to its fore-knees, toppled, while the girl shrieked her triumph.

Now the high priest edged forward and offered the dancer a white dove. For a moment she stared fixedly at it with glowing eyes as if indecisive; then with a throaty exclamation of hate she twisted the bird's neck and tossed the limp mass of feathers into the chalice. Instantly the odor of burned flesh and feathers filled the room and white smoke hung low.

Once more Sherry Gates swore under his breath and strove to work his hands and feet from their bonds. The symbolism of the white goat was obvious, too obvious; it meant death to the two white men. And the white dove—it represented Rose Mandeville in all likelihood, indicated her doom. Where was she? Probably a prisoner somewhere in the old ruins, bound and awaiting helplessly the fate of the white dove.

The smell of searing flesh which rose from the chalice seemed to drive the blacks into a frenzy of passion. Simultaneously they leaped to their feet, calling strange words, weaving in and out in a patternless, timeless dance, pausing only to grin down at the two helpless white men. The black girl whirled among them until suddenly she dropped limply in a swoon of exhaustion.

"I guess this is the end," muttered Sherry Gates. "A hell of a way to go, too."

"God!" groaned Circus Sam Digrout. "If only they would get it over with! That's all I want now."

CHAPTER VII

THAT voodoo dance, unspeakably abandoned and terrible, continued for long, long minutes in front of the horrified eyes of the two white men, tied and helpless on the slime-exuding cellar floor of the old ruined Castle Montclair. Like black bats in the night the naked negroes, *cacos* and peasants, circled and swooped around the smoking chalice, led by the *Papa Loi* and the ape-like Sigo. Gradually their steps brought them closer to the thonged bodies of Sherry Gates and Circus Sam Digrout, until the pounding bare feet seemed certain to stamp on the faces and straining bodies of the two *blanchs*.

Suddenly the high priest, he with the white lines and scar ridges criss-crossing his muscular torso, ceased his wild gyrations and uttered a single bellow, a stentorian cry which seemed to shake the very walls of the old castle. As instantly as if they were ten pins bowled over by the reverberating noise, the black dancers fell to the floor in grotesque, shadowy heaps. Their heads were carefully turned, however, toward the high priest and their eyes were fixed on that gigantic, gleaming body.

There in the center of the cellar of horrors the *Papa Loi* seized the knife which the swooning girl dancer had dropped; he waved it over his head, cutting fanciful patterns in the murky, smoke-laden atmosphere, then dug it thrice into the embers of the chalice. Now he waved it again and made a motion of stabbing himself, but shifted the blade during the last tenth-second of its forward flash. Again and again he drove the gleaming weapon toward his body, diverting it as it grazed the skin. At last the negroes on the floor, motionless as so many ebony logs, began to mutter their impatience.

Again the high priest bellowed; he hesitated a second, then drove the knife toward his body. This time the motion was unchecked. The knife slid into his black left arm, on through it, until the point showed beyond. Quickly it was withdrawn, only to stab in again, this time at the gleaming thigh which it penetrated for almost the full length of the six-inch blade. There it remained, while the blacks on the floor, staring at the quivering hilt, groaned strangely, as if in a confusion of mingled pain and pleasure.

"There, Digrout, is your Man-No-Can-Hurt," muttered Sherry Gates, ceaselessly tugging at the thongs which bound him. "I hope to the devil you're satisfied! Now maybe you'll die happy!"

Circus Sam was speechless, his red eyes wide and unbelieving. In front of him in that smoke-choked cellar was the black giant he had come so far to see, for whom he had endured so many physical agonies and so much of the torture of fear, for whom he was at that moment facing horrible death. Momentarily all these things of the past, even the doom he was facing, were forgotten.

"Damn my soul, what a side-show freak he'd make!" muttered the circus man. "He—he—why, he actually stabs himself without saying 'boo'!"

"And he'll probably stab you without saying 'baa'," added Sherry Gates. "Say, Digrout," he added in an urgent whisper, "try to pull out of those damned thongs! I've pulled at mine until I'm all in and I can't budge them. Try yours! It's our only chance and time's about up."

"Try mine!" mimicked Circus Sam. "What the hell do you think I've been doing the last half hour? My arms and legs are raw as beefsteak."

"Well, then we're nearing the end," promised Gates dolefully. "It's only a matter of minutes, I guess. The magic stuff is reaching its peak. What's old *Papa Loi* doing now?"

With the knife handle still protruding from his thigh, the high priest whirled and clapped his hands, issuing rapid orders in Creole. Two of the negroes on the floor squirmed away like black worms, disappearing through the door across the room. A moment later they returned, bearing between them a strange burden.

Supine on a litter fashioned from saplings was Rose Mandeville. Even in the half-light of the cellar she appeared beautiful, aloof, regal despite her degrading bonds. Her bare arms had been crossed over her breast and tied there; they gleamed strangely white in that room full of blacks. Her face, too, impassive and set, was the color of marble. On her bare ankles circlets of gold had been placed and, like the negro dancing girl, a single red feather had been put in her hair. Her eyes, brilliant slits under half-closed lids, studied that den of voodooism and the figures in it. When her sight became accustomed to the murky half-light she saw the figures of the two white men bound and motionless in the far corner of the fetid cave. She scrutinized them carefully and under a blackened face recognized the features and blue eyes of Sherry Gates. A single cry was wrung from her set lips.

"Sherry!" The word was freighted with sorrow and dying hope.

Except for a renewed tugging at the plaited thongs which bound him, the helpless man made no reply. Every atom of his strength went into that final futile bid for freedom. Ah, what he would give in return for a single moment in which to charge those grinning blacks! One minute—if he could have just one minute with a gun or a knife, or even his bare fists—he'd show the girl what he could do, make a desperate bid for her life and his! But that one minute was denied him by bonds which did not give, and at last he gave up the hopeless struggle and watched the strange procession of events helplessly.

The high priest advanced to the litter; he grinned down at Rose Mandeville just as he had grinned at Circus Sam and Sherry Gates, a cruel, anticipatory smirk showing his great teeth. Then he began to mutter a sing-song incantation, passing his black arms and yellow hands back and forth through the air over the girl's body with a strange, snake-like sinuosity. At last he turned to the black dancing girl who was still lying on the floor beside the smoking chalice. To her he issued rumbling orders. She arose quickly from her real or feigned swoon and with a single motion she seized the knife from the high priest's thigh. After the blade followed a spurt of blood which the gigantic black strove to conceal by whirling quickly around and around until he reached a shadowy corner, where he remained half-hidden, his horrible part in the exhibition completed.

Now the *Maman Loi* again took the center of the stage. With the brown-stained knife waving ahead of her she swung into a dance, slower and more purposeful than her previous effort.

"Lord, how much longer?" breathed Sherry Gates. "Is it to go on forever?"

As if in answer to Sherry's plea for action, the dancing girl glided forward until she stood over the litter wherein lay Rose Mandeville. She raised the knife high in the air directly above the throat of the white girl. The blade quivered in the murky light. Ready to plunge, yet it hesitated.

The negroes on the floor raised their black bodies, eager as children to see the final act of the weird ceremony. Sherry Gates shouted hoarse orders and pleas, commanding the black girl to spare Rose Mandeville, incoherently promising his own life for hers. Circus Sam Digrout groaned and shut his eyes. Rose Mandeville strove to move her head from under the threatening blade, then gazed up at it, dumbly awaiting death.

The knife rose high in the air and plunged. The blacks clucked gutturally in their throats and their eyes rolled and gleamed.

A white virgin was about to be sacrificed to Obeah and the God of the Green Snake. For so it had been ordered long ago.

CHAPTER VIII

SO CLOSE was death to Rose Mandeville, there in the voodoo chamber of Castle Montclair, that the gloating negroes on the floor, even Sherry Gates and Circus Sam Digrout, believed for a moment that the *Maman Loi* had completed the sacrifice. A strange sound, like the soughing of wind in cypress trees, swept through the cellar, the prolonged "o-o-o-ohs" of the blacks, the muffled groan of Sherry Gates and an oath from Circus Sam. Then the knife in the hand of the high priestess rose again and all saw that its blade had not touched the beautiful girl on the litter. But now it descended once more toward the bare throat of its intended victim; it wavered, it hesitated.

For the first time during that long ceremony the dancing girl seemed indecisive, uncertain of what to do. Across her face flashed an expression akin to fear and she tilted her head as if listening to some vague, distant sound.

A change had taken place in the other blacks also, and the old castle cellar was suddenly as silent as a tomb of death. The voodooists were all listening now as if they, too, felt rather than heard some disturbance.

Sherry Gates, watching the girl dancer and the other negroes with awful fascination, saw their expressions alter. From wild exaltation and fierce blood-lust doubt crept over the negroid features and doubt gradually gave place to fear. So definite was the change, so certain, that the American fancied that he felt a strange new presence in that murky cellar.

Mutterings sounded. *"Papa. . . . Papa Loi!"* The words were first breathed, then choked; finally it was formed aloud by many thick lips. *"Papa!"* And now abject fear swept through that chamber of voodooism like a gust of wind.

Long, silent moments passed. The blacks were mouthing to themselves; the *Maman Loi* had dropped her knife and backed away from Rose Mandeville to hide her face in her hands, but the others remained as motionless as ebony statues. In the corner shadows Sherry Gates and Circus Sam Digrout endured the aching of their lungs as they strove to check their breathing. They felt an eerie oppression of mind and body, until it seemed that they, like the the black voodooists, had been ordered into lethargic limbo, a state of mental and physical paralysis.

Now, for the first time, a definite sound came from outside. It was the pad of bare feet on stone. Suddenly just beyond the corner a bell sounded, low-toned and muffled, and through the opening flickered a yellow light which threw grotesque shadows ahead of it. The sound of feet and the flickering torches came closer, closer, until there moved silently into the silent cellar room the strangest of all the disciples of Obeah.

High on a chair of throne-like proportions which was carried by four powerful blacks sat René Mandeville. He was absolutely rigid. The torches on each side of him glistened on his waxen face and his eyes were like red coals in the semi-darkness. Except for those eyes he might well have been a corpse, so motionless, so expressionless he was. A single robe of flaming red covered his thin, half-dead body.

At sight of him, aloof and majestic on his throne, the blacks in that chamber of horrors threw themselves on the floor and grovelled, muttering: *"Papa . . . Papa Loi!"*

The throne was carried to the center of the room and lowered carefully beside the chalice whose light, together with that of the torches, showed it in all its intricacies of rich carving and bizarre coloring.

"Old René Mandeville himself!"

The words were wrung from Circus Sam Digrout by utter astonishment.

"Who?" demanded Sherry Gates, raising his head to stare at that stiff white figure in the throne chair. "Who'd you say?"

"René Mandeville, the girl's father," exclaimed Circus Sam. "I thought there was some deviltry—"

"Aw—"

The words of disbelief from Sherry Gates were silenced by new action in that cellar room.

René Mandeville had stared down at the girl on the litter but the expression of his face had not changed; he had stared at the two huddled figures in the corner and showed no surprise or anger or pity; now he surveyed the grovelling blacks and began to speak to them. His voice was cold, monotoned, yet each of the Creole words was bitten off with a certain fierceness, a strange mingling of anger and contempt. Obviously he was lashing the supine blacks with his tongue, and they endured it silently, as if they knew it was their due.

At last the tone of René's voice changed and he issued an order. Two of the voodooists rose obediently and slunk to the side of Rose Mandeville's litter as if they were about to release the girl. Immediately a flood of protest swept the cellar room, audible on many lips and obvious on every black face. No, the voodooists were not willing to lose their sacrifice of the white virgin so easily.

Words rushed in a cold torrent from the thin lips of René Mandeville now and his eyes flashed imperiously. Yet the blacks did not obey him. The old man stared from face to face with his glittering black eyes intent; obviously he sought to reestablish his power. But the two negroes beside Rose's litter, sullen and defiant, moved away to join their rebellious companions. Old René attempted to reach down with a knife to cut the thongs himself, but a hoarse, threatening growl from many throats checked him.

ONCE more the voice of René Mandeville changed; this time it swung into an incantation, an outlandish jumble of words and sounds accompanied by the waving of his long white hands which seemed to weave a spell over the voodooists. He paused suddenly and issued another order which was obeyed with alacrity. Closer to his side was moved the chalice of beaten metal; the fire in it was restored with bits of wood until it flamed high in the center of the dark room, throwing grotesque, dancing shadows along the walls.

René Mandeville, the strangest of all *Papa Lois*, passed his hands back and forth through the yellow flames until it seemed that they must indeed be bloodless and nerveless. He spoke again and the natives crowded close to listen, a pushing circle of black bodies and rolling eyes.

"What's the old devil saying?" demanded Circus Sam Digrout, his voice rising incautiously. "Can you beat it, in cahoots with the niggers?"

"Sh-h!" warned Sherry Gates in a whisper. "Maybe he's in with the voodooists, but right now he's having a tussle with them, trying to save his daughter from the sacrifice. If I understand the gabble, he's trying to bargain for the life of Rose and the blacks are determined to stick by the sacrifice . . . Now he's saying something about lights, red lights and blue lights meaning something. Look!"

Again the long white hands of René Mandeville flashed through the flames of the chalice. Once, twice, thrice they cut the fire and suddenly the blaze turned from yellow to a ghastly blue which lighted the room from corner to corner. The faces of the blacks appeared more frightful than ever in the strange glow, and the deathlike mask of René Mandeville was horrible beyond words.

The blacks uttered a cry of pleasure at the white man's magic but made no move to release Rose Mandeville, their intended sacrifice. Still defying the *Papa Loi* they were.

Old René's mouth and bloodless lips uttered words and his voice stung with its venom; again he reached down to cut his daughter's bonds. A bellow sounded. Out of the corner leaped the black high priest, Man-No-Can-Hurt, who had kept himself well-concealed following his weird exhibition. Straight toward Rose Mandeville he bounded, a knife raised high above him. After him, like a black roaring flood, the other voodooists followed. Obvious, it was, that they intended to attack the old man, tear him from his throne and complete the sacrifice of the daughter.

"It's the end," gasped Sherry Gates. "God, the end!"

Close to the throne chair the charging blacks stopped as suddenly as if they had hit a stone wall. René Mandeville had sunk his head far down between his shoulders and his jet eyes were staring at his assailants, staring with indescribable intensity. The blacks hesitated, quailed, backed away before that flaming glance and the terrible will behind it like dogs from the lash of their master. They were thoroughly cowed by the white man's mind and will, and Man-No-Can-Hurt himself led the slow retreat to the walls.

Now old René Mandeville spoke again, slowly, considerately, as if nothing had happened, as if he had not been on the very threshold of terrible death. He passed his hands through the flame once more and this time a red light flooded the room. As the fiery glow cast all objects into blood-red relief the old man began an incantation. This time the words were in English, obviously addressed to the two men in the corner and to his daughter, yet uttered in the sing-song of a chant.

"The power of my will still holds over these blacks, but we are on the verge of a volcano," he recited monotonously. "I am trying to save you. Obey me without hesitancy. A false move will mean the death of us all. Now close your eyes tightly, all of you. Rose, be ready to come to my side. I will drop a flash powder into the chalice when I say 'three'. One, two—"

An explosion shook the air in that cellar room, a white light blinded its occupants. Shouts of astonishment and pain echoed from the stone walls and a white smoke cloud hung in the heavy air. For a moment after that explosion of light the room seemed in utter darkness, so feeble by contrast was the flickering of the chalice and the torches.

When the blacks regained their sight a strange sigh went up: "O-o-o-ah"—a gasp redolent with pleased astonishment. Rose Mandeville was now seated on the throne chair beside her father and muttering low words to him. In that half minute given him by the blinding flash of bismuth the old man had reached down, cut the thongs which bound his daughter and pulled her to his side. White magic! Old *Papa Loi* was working miracles indeed!

"Good!" announced René Mandeville, beginning again the monotonous sing-song of an incantation. "Now, Ill try to save Monsieur Sherry Gates, and you, Monsieur Digrout. But remember—absolute obedience! It is all very difficult."

The incantation was ended. Old René Mandeville turned his white face to the voodooists and addressed them directly. Instantly the blacks turned toward the two bound men in the corner and started to release them, pulling at their thongs, but a bellowed protest stopped them. It was the gigantic Man-No-Can-Hurt who had leaped forward again and was shouting at his followers in Creole. Instantly the blacks slid away from the hopeful white men, leaving them still tied.

"I can't make them obey," intoned old René Mandeville. "But we have a trick or two left."

He relapsed into the Creole, speaking rapidly, persuasively. The blacks, even Man-No-Can-Hurt, nodded and grunted their agreement. After a moment of listening to the white high priest's words, several of them rushed to Sherry Gates and carried him to the center of the room, where they stood him beside the burning chalice.

AGAIN René Mandeville began a gibberish of Creole and drew from under his robes two revolvers. He cast his eyes over the blacks until he found the cowering form of the weazened Sigo. Him he ordered forward. The little black, eyes rolling right and left in search of some way of escape, was shoved ahead by his black companions until he stood beside the straight figure of Sherry Gates. Now René Mandeville called another instructive incantation in English.

"I'm going to prove to them, Monsieur Gates, that you are also a Man-No-Can-Hurt. I am going to shoot you with a revolver. When I have shot you, laugh! Laugh loudly, Monsieur Gates, very loudly! Then to prove that my revolvers are good, I will shoot Sigo with the second. Sigo will die. Remember to laugh!"

Now the incantation ran into the Creole language again and the blacks crowded forward, curious as children, while the words, "laugh, die," rang in the ears of Sherry Gates. Slowly old René Mandeville raised the revolver in his right hand and levelled it at the heart of the ex-marine, who blinked but did not waver.

"Obeah!" called René, and his finger pulled at the trigger.

The sound of the revolver in that underground ruin was deafening. Sherry Gates swayed on his feet and blinked; his hands rose involuntarily to his chest which burned from the impact of powder and wadding.

"Laugh!" barked René Mandeville.

Sherry Gates strove to obey. A throaty noise sounded, rising higher and higher until it became a roar of forced mirth, half-hysterical and awful to hear at first, but gradually gaining in timbre. The blacks looked at the white man and wondered, half-believing already that here was another Man-No-Can-Hurt.

Again old René Mandeville spoke, this time leveling a revolver at the heart of Sigo who crouched fearfully, still seeking a way of escape.

"Perhaps Sigo, too, is a Man-No-Can-Hurt," René declared in Creole. "Or perhaps he is a traitor to Obeah. Or perhaps you think my guns are not good. Watch!"

His finger pulled the trigger of the second revolver. Again the deafening explosion followed, echoing from wall to wall of the underground room. On the dying echoes sounded a single sharp cry like that of an animal and Sigo crumpled to the floor, a limp, lifeless mass at which the blacks gazed in wonder, their blood lust momentarily appeased.

Taking advantage of the impression he had created, René Mandeville ordered the thongs which bound Sherry Gates cut. The blacks obeyed with alacrity while the ex-marine continued to emit peal after peal of his throaty mirthless laughter.

"Move back!" ordered René Mandeville. "Likely as not they will not touch you now. You have become a Man-No-Can-Hurt. But slip away from here at the first chance. There may be more trouble ahead."

Sherry Gates, feeling as if his stiff muscles would not support him, moved painfully back to the wall of the cellar and slid along it toward the door while the blacks stared at old René Mandeville, awaiting expectantly for further exhibitions of his power.

Circus Sam Digrout, still bound and helpless in the corner of the room, wondered what ordeal was facing him, little visioning the terrible torture he would have to undergo unflinchingly to save his life.

CHAPTER IX

ORDERS from René Mandeville caused the black voodooists to bring Circus Sam Digrout to the center of the black chamber and stand him beside the smoking chalice, just as they had placed Sherry Gates. But Digrout did not stand straight and stalwartly; he swayed on his feet; his face was white with fear and glistened with cold perspiration, his little eyes begged piteously for mercy.

"Monsieur Digrout," intoned old René, "you too, must become Man-No-Can-Hurt. Your test will be severe. Unfortunately I have no more revolvers loaded with blank cartridges, no more flash powders to impress the natives with my magic. I have thought of no way to save you except the knife."

Circus Sam gulped. He was sick with fear, and the word "knife" almost caused him to topple to the floor. He caught control of himself and during the next speech of René Mandeville he froze like a man without life.

"Yes, it must be the knife, Monsieur Digrout! Just as the real Man-No-Can-Hurt did, you must do! Understand! You must stab yourself, you must not flinch! Your life is at stake. Better two knife wounds than death by torture, *n'est pas?* Ah, but I will help you, Monsieur! Watch my eyes! My will, Monsieur Digrout, will strengthen your will to endure. Watch my eyes and stab boldly, for death is the penalty."

Now René Mandeville turned to the blacks, who were pressing ever closer, staring at the big, flabby white man with a curiosity both childish and morbid. The *Maman Loi* slid forward with the thin silver knife and proffered it to René, who took it and examined it carefully.

"See, Monsieur, it is very thin! The cut will be clean. But you must stab boldly, I repeat!"

Circus Sam blinked at the weapon with which he must torture himself. His face was green and his loose lips drooled. A very sick man was Circus Sam, he who had come so far to see Man-No-Can-Hurt and who now had become, himself, the main exhibition. He strove to mumble words of protest but they died on his lips as René Mandeville extended the knife to him.

"If you have a God, Monsieur Digrout," said the white high priest quietly, "pray to him for strength! Take this knife. Jab it into the embers of the chalice three times. That is part of the ritual and it sterilizes the blade, which is well. Then wave it over your head, and stab, Monsieur! Watch my eyes! Watch! All ready! The knife, Monsieur!"

René fixed his glowing eyes on the fear-smitten ones of Circus Sam Digrout; the old man's stare was as brilliant as fire, as dazzling as huge diamonds, as coldly intense as an iceberg in the sun. Mesmerizing, those jet eyes were, flashing not-to-be-denied orders into the weaker mind of Circus Sam, giving his will a strength not intrinsic, making, temporarily, a brave man of a physical coward.

"Ready, Monsieur, the knife!"

His eyes fixed on the death-masked face of René Mandeville, Circus Sam stabbed the glittering blade three times into the chalice; he flashed it in a small arc over his head, he drove it down toward his left arm. It bit deeply; he pushed again, grunting, and perspiration dripped from his fat jowls to the floor. The blacks murmured; Rose Mandeville turned her face away and tugged gently at Sherry Gates, who was watching the strange scene with that horrible fascination which the voodoo cellar had fixed on him. Old René Mandeville sat as motionless, apparently as lifeless, as a statue of the Buddha.

"Now the thigh, Monsieur!" he muttered. "All the blade!" His verbal orders were as nothing to the command of his eyes.

Circus Sam, with a sigh of agony, drew the knife from his arm and flashed it again over his head.

"Deep, Monsieur!"

The words were not spoken, but seemed to flash through the air from the will of René into the will of Circus Sam.

The knife drove downward; it penetrated the flesh of Digrout, it remained there, the blade buried, the handle quivering. Now that strange sough of pleasure sounded again through the cellar room; the blacks crowded as close to the new Man-No-Can-Hurt as children gather to a street corner Santa Claus, gazing at him with eyes rolling with pleasure.

Rose Mandeville and Sherry Gates took advantage of the momentary pre-occupation of the blacks to slip out through the corner door. A moment later they were staggering and stumbling hand-in-hand through the underground passage. They reached the little opening near the wall, clambered out of it. And still they ran.

Overhead the stars gleamed low and silver. Behind lay the voodoo chamber of torture and horror; the repulsive blacks, René Mandeville, the white *Papa Loi*. And now back there in the den of the Obeah were two of those strange creatures known as Man-No-Can-Hurt. Ahead lay the hills and jungles of Haiti. Never had fresh air seemed so good, so clean, so intoxicating.

"Sherry!" called the girl, and there was a trembling in her voice.

"Rose! . . . Thank God!"

The two slipped and slid down the hill of Castle Montclair, into the jungle.

CHAPTER X

CIRCUS SAM DIGROUT was sprawled drunkenly across the box table in that den known as The Duke's Palace, down toward the water front of Port-au-Prince. Beside him was a disreputable white derelict, a man named Carruthers, who was coarser, tougher, and just now even drunker than Circus Sam himself. Carruthers had been dragged from the gutter into that dive in order that Circus Sam might have a companion in his final drinking orgy, an auditor for his garrulous monologue.

From along the mahogany bar many half-naked native blacks stared at Circus Sam. In their eyes was an expression of deep respect; contempt for the big, flabby *blanch* no longer marked their gleaming faces. In that mysterious manner in which messages cross the Haitian wilds with almost telephonic swiftness, word had reached those blacks in The Duke's Palace that Circus Sam was a man of prowess; ah, yes—he was a second Man-No-Can-Hurt! Many eyes watched him, wondering, childish eyes.

Slumped across the table, his red face pushed close to the dirty, hirsute countenance of his drunken companion and auditor, Circus Sam was talking with loose-tongued abandon, obviously finishing a story which he had been relating and which excited him wildly.

"With that knife still in my leg," he blurred, "old Pop Mandeville motioned me to a place beside his throne chair, in that damned den of voodooism. Yes sir, right beside him, and all the voodooists looked at me with rolling eyes. The girl, Rose, and Sherry Gates had slipped out; I knew that . . . Hi, waiter, more rum!" He pounded on the table with a glass and glared around him belligerently.

When the drink was served him, he paid for it with silver and his flabby hands trembled so that he could scarcely count the money.

"Well," he went on, "I didn't see much that happened in that old cellar of the castle from then on. Nope. I was all in, I tell you. I could feel the blood running down into my shoe. Sick I was, gosh-awful sick. All the time old Pop Mandeville was talking to those damned coons. Performing magic, too, I guess, from the way the 'ohs' and 'ahs' sounded. Anyway, he showed them that we were both great men. Yep, great magicians. So after a while they put me on the litter for my throne. Then they carried us out, both of us, with a big lot of ceremony, old Pop Mandeville on his throne chair and me on the litter, raised high in the air. Yep, carried us out in state as if we was the kings of Sulu or something. Lord, that first breath of air outside was good! Good? Say, you'll nev'er know how good. . . . Hi, waiter, more rum! . . . We'll drink to the good clean air, God bless it!

"Well, they carried us down the hill, me on the litter and old Pop Mandeville on the throne, on down that hill. Then most of them left us to go back to their stinking cellar, and that white dead devil of a Mandeville gave some orders. While he was at it I passed out. Yep, passed out cold. Pain and exhaustion and loss of blood, I guess. Say, no man coulda gone through what I did, in the way I did, and not be all in. Nope. Anyone woulda passed out.

"Well, when I woke up I was in the shack of that fellow Gates, Sherry Gates, back at his jungle plantation, and that girl, that Venus called Rose, was pouring water into me and bathing my face. Say, she's a peach! Let's drink to her."

The flabby trembling hand raised the glass high in the air, lowered it to loose lips. Then Circus Sam continued:

"I stayed up there in that shack of Sherry Gates for three weeks, all the time expecting the devilish *cacos* to get me. But they didn't. Pop Mandeville and Rose left in a couple of days. I was glad of it, too, 'cause it made me feel kinda bad; I mean the way Rose and that Gates fellow looked at each other with love just popping on their faces. But, me, I ain't got nothing against either of 'em. No sir. Nor old man Mandeville, either. The girl's a queen, I tell you, and her old man saved my life. Yes sir! Saved my life up there in that damned den of voodooism. Made me stab myself, he did, and I obeyed like a soldier. Yep, I'm a brave man, I guess, but I appreciate all old Pop Mandeville did for me. You see, he had got scared after we started, and rumors about the Obeah came to him down here in Port-au-Prince. He'd been a priest of the Obeah for a long time, picking up a little loose change that way, I s'pose, and ruling those blacks by his will power.

"Will power? Say, you never knew anything like it. When we were all being tortured in that voodoo cellar he sent his will on ahead of him to stop those blacks."

Circus Sam raised his purple face and thrust his jaw toward his companion. "You damned skunk, you don't believe me, do you? Well, he did, I tell you. He sent his will on ahead of him just as those coons were going to kill his daughter and kill us. Stopped them all, he did. Yes sir. Me, I know he did, and just to show how much I appreciated it I gave him the extra two hundred dollars I promised him if he'd show me the Man-No-Can-Hurt. Well, he did, righto! And the old fellow saved my life I tell you, with my own natural bravery to help him. . . . Hi, there, more rum! Rum, I say!"

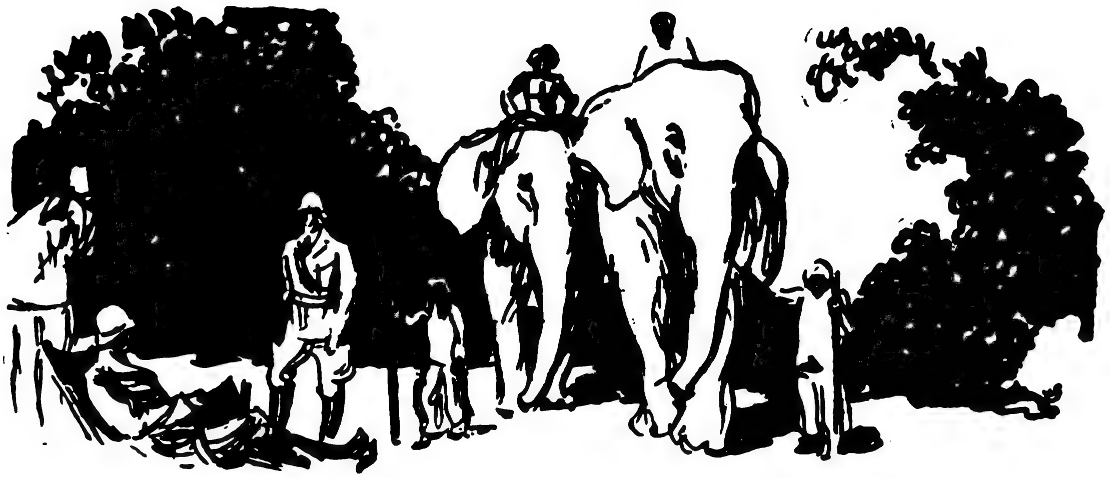
For a moment Circus Sam was silent, watching a half-naked black servant bring two more glasses of raw rum, then his voice blurred on:

"Now old René Mandeville can die happy, like he's been trying to do these last ten years, 'cause his daughter'll have a dowry. Only the girl won't need it. Nope! That Sherry Gates fellow is going to marry her next week, and a hell of a lot he cares about any dowry. They'll live up on that plantation he's whittling outa the wilds and the *cacos* won't touch 'em, because he's a Man-No-Can-Hurt and she's the high priest's daughter . . . Say, old bum, drink deep!

"You know what I'm going to do now? Well, my boat sails tomorrow. Back to the good old U. S. A. I'm going straight to the Chicago Black Belt and there I'm going to get me a coon man and girl. I'll teach them to do the voodoo dance just like I saw it done, the white dove, the goat, the knives, everything. 'The Voodoo Dance of Death', I'll call it, and believe me, it'll make a hit! Say, I'll make my fortune, I tell you! I can train them two to put on the most gosh-awful dance you ever saw. You betcha, because, me, I know!"

Once again Circus Sam relapsed into silence; he shut his eyes and his purple-red face worked spasmodically. "Ever seen a voodoo dance, Carruthers, old buck?" he asked after a moment. "Well, don't. It ain't good for the nerves, and it ain't good for sleep. It ain't good for no one. Me, of course, it don't bother me because I—I am Man-No-Can-Hurt."

The head of Circus Sam Digrout sank lower and lower on the box table until it lolled limply between his arms. "I am Man-No-Can-Hurt!" he muttered.



"Tales of the Teak Forest"

PRESTIGE

By REGINALD CAMPBELL

This excellent and ingenious story is the first of a dramatic series about John Hinton, Jungle Wallah, concerning whom you will find more in

EVERYBODY'S MEETING PLACE

IN THE mind of John Hinton was a vast satisfaction as he watched the campfire hissing and crackling outside his tent. Things were going well in the teak forest of which he was the sole European in charge. His elephants were all in splendid condition, his coolies, chainmen and mahouts were working excellently, and the rainy season, with all its attendant horrors, had come to an end at last, to be replaced by the brief cold weather of Northern Siam.

It was good, this cold weather, for it transformed the jungle from a sinister, dripping darkness to a world of quiet beauty, wherein dreamed clear, open glades cooled by fresh-blowing winds from the north.

The wind was blowing now. It whirled and writhed round the flickering flames of the fire; it roared and lashed through the tree-tops; and its strong, virile presence sent a thrill through Hinton's heart. Here was he, one small, insignificant atom, alone with the wind in the nethermost part of his forest. Yet, wholly without protection, he held dominion over one thousand square miles of rolling jungle and the men and the beasts that dwelt therein. He was an uncrowned king, with no courtiers, no army, no navy, but he ruled, and he ruled by the sole aid of that magic word—"prestige."

And prestige John Hinton undoubtedly possessed, for, as the night grew darker, his dusky Lao servant approached him and salaamed profoundly.

"Master," said the bronze image, "a white lord has even now come to the camp. He wishes to see you, master."

At the news Hinton started. It was late in the day for a white man to visit him, but doubtless the newcomer was one of the few other teak-wallahs scattered over Upper Siam, and he would welcome him gladly. He told the boy accordingly, then hastily opened a bottle of whisky, for the night was growing cold and his guest would be chilled to the bone.

When the new arrival appeared, however, Hinton was speedily disillusioned, for here was no teak-wallah that stood before him, but a down-at-heel individual with unkempt hair, a week's growth of beard, and clothes that would have shamed a coolie.

The individual, on seeing the look of astonishment in Hinton's eyes, came straight to the point with surprising alacrity.

"My name is Stranson," he said briefly. "My profession, a variety artist, with plenty of variety. My address, any place where the authorities will have difficulty in finding me. Now I've met your kind before and I know you won't want me in your camp, for my presence will be a distinct nuisance to you. But all I ask is that you put me up for the night, and I promise you I'll clear off first thing tomorrow morning. Can do?"

Hinton betrayed no surprise and, motioning the speaker to a chair, intimated that whisky would be his for the asking.

"Would I like a drink?" Mr. Stranson signified his answer by shooting out a skinny arm towards the bottle. Having drunk liberally, he wiped his mouth, then turned to his host again.

"Expect you'd like to know how I blew in here, Mr.—ah, Mr. Hinton," he said affably. "Well, at present I'm travelling for—er—business reasons from the Burma border to the head of the Siam railway. The path, as I suppose you know, runs just below your camp, and from it I saw the light of your fire. So I came along to cadge a dinner, and perhaps a drink."

The speaker paused, and Hinton looked at him narrowly, trying to ascertain what manner of man he was. The tones in which Stranson spoke were those of an educated gentleman, though his appearance certainly belied the fact. The mouth was weak and sensual and the cheeks deeply lined for one who could not be more than thirty years of age, yet the eyes were almost likeable. At times they would light with an expression that was half-mocking, half-defiant, as if their owner was a bad boy who had flung, and would keep on flinging, defiance at a quiet, well-ordered world.

"Go on," said Stranson suddenly. "Tell us what you're thinking about now."

"I was wondering where your transport is?" parried Hinton.

"Transport," the other laughed mirthlessly. "Surely you know that a beachcomber doesn't bother himself about elephants and coolies? It's all he can do to transport his own gin-sodden carcass about, I can tell you."

Now John Hinton had, up till now, very little experience of such gentry, as a glance at the dictionary will explain. The word "beachcomber," as defined therein, means: "a long rolling wave: a drunken loafer about the wharfs in Pacific sea-ports." The forests of Northern Siam, being many hundreds of miles from the Pacific, therefore clearly have no beachcombers. The only white men there, in fact, are teak-wallahs like John Hinton himself, wherefore are they sahibs, great lords and, moreover, kings among elephants.

"Now that you're here," breathed Hinton at length, interested in spite of himself, "let's have your story."

STRANSON, his tongue loosened by the whisky, gave him it. It was not a particularly pleasant story, but boiled down, and with certain parts omitted, it came to this. He, Albert Ernest Stranson, to give his name in full, was born in Australia of well-to-do parents. On completing his education in that country, the Great War broke out, whereupon, to his honor, he volunteered for service overseas.

Followed four years of mud, slush and blood in Flanders, at the end of which time he was demobilized and repatriated to Australia. On the way back there, however, trouble overtook him at Port Said in the shape of a pretty, painted chorus girl who had a small part in a touring theatrical company. For the sake of this little person Stranson had quitted his ship and tacked himself on to the skirts of the company. With it he had travelled to Colombo, Singapore and finally Batavia, where the show had come to the end of its capital and gone completely broke. The girl had then got out of an awkward situation by eloping with a coffee planter, leaving Mr. Stranson, who by now also was penniless, alone and friendless in the Dutch East Indies, which are thirsty places for a white man who has looked upon drink and found it good.

Fortunately he had discovered, while with the aforesaid company, that he himself possessed some acting ability, for he could mime, grimace, gibber, grin, and perform a hundred and one queer athletic tricks of the monkey kind. With this talent, therefore, he proceeded to tour the gin saloons, where he earned enough to obtain the wherewithal to ease his parched and burning throat.

Thereafter he speedily qualified for the title of beachcomber. He worked in spasms, drank, swore, worked again, and drifted. In a coasting steamer he shipped to Singapore, thence to Rangoon, after which he floated up-country, where he performed his monkey tricks before gaping Burmese audiences, which is a thing no white man should do.

The Burma officials apparently thought the same, for they promptly ordered him out of the country on the ground that he was an undesirable calculated to lower the prestige of the British race. He had therefore crossed over on foot to Siam, in an endeavor to reach the head of the railway at Lakon Lampang. There he would do more tricks, this time in front of a mixed Lao and Siamese audience, after which he would purchase a third-class ticket to Bangkok.

Once in Siam's capital he would be in clover. The saloons and questionable music halls were many, so he had been given to understand, and, moreover, there he would be free from interfering, troublesome, unnecessary British jurisdiction.

Thus spoke Mr. Albert Ernest Stranson, and when he had come to the end of his tale, John Hinton coughed.

"And your people?" he asked, after a pause.

Stranson shrugged careless shoulders. Whether they were alive or not he didn't know; it didn't matter, anyway; nothing mattered, nowadays.

The arrival of dinner put a temporary end to the conversation, for Mr. Stranson was extremely hungry, and not until the last course had been cleared away by the watchful Lao boy did he speak again.

"Tell me, Mr. Hinton," he said comfortably, as he selected with care a large cheroot from his host's cigar-box, "what is all this about the white man's prestige? I got fairly sick of the sound of the word in Burma, I heard it so often."

For answer Hinton pointed to the darkness of the surrounding forest, which still roared and swirled in the cool night wind.

"That is the answer," he said quietly.

"Too much of a parable for me, I'm afraid," smiled Stranson, and the mocking light danced in his eyes. "Please explain."

"Up-country, not only in Siam but in every other lonely part of the world, we white chaps have one thing, and one thing only, to protect us. That is prestige," said Hinton gravely. "Now take my own case. If my mahouts wanted to murder me, they could do so with ease. Should my cook wish to poison me, he could do so and get off scot-free. Post-mortem examinations need doctors, and the nearest doctor from here is a hundred miles away."

"But don't you ever have trouble with these niggers?" queried his listener.

Hinton smiled grimly. "I do—sometimes, but those who try it usually come off second best. You see, in their heart of hearts the natives fear me, as they fear all the other teak-wallahs in the district."

"Bet they don't fear *me*," observed Stranson with a grin.

"There you are wrong, for I can assure you that they do."

"What? Fear me, of all people!"

"Yes, for the simple reason that they have been taught by us to believe that every white man is a great lord, and," Hinton paused meaningly, "it's up to us, for our own sakes, to see that they always foster this belief."

Stranson's pallid features flushed ever so slightly, and his feet shifted uncomfortably. He felt meaner, smaller than he had ever done before, and all because the presence of his host gave him a strange sense of absolute inferiority. Hinton, though simple and kindly, seemed to possess some terrific latent power which was altogether indefinable, and the result was not good for Stranson's self-esteem.

"Then how," asked the latter after an uneasy pause, "how are you going to explain me away to the natives?"

"I've already done so. I've told my boy that you're a traveller who's lost his elephants and coolies through their taking the wrong route to Lakon Lampang."

"But will your men believe this tale?"

"Why shouldn't they? They won't question what I say unless any tangible proof comes along to show them that you aren't quite what I made you out to be."

"Me with elephants and coolies! Oh, holy gee!" exclaimed Stranson, the mocking light returning to his eyes.

Hinton rose to his feet. "I'm going to turn in now," he told the other. "The rattan chair will do for me, and you can have my bed. Tomorrow I'll give you some clothes and your train fare down to Bangkok. Once there, why not try to get a respectable job of sorts and save up enough money to take you back to Australia? For three hundred ticals you could book a decent passage, in a decent ship, and arrive in your own country looking a decent human being."

"The old story," sneered Stranson, "the black sheep returning, very repentant and swearing to make good. Shepherd of the Hills, I hear you calling, and all that sort of dope."

"Good-night," said Hinton somewhat tersely, ignoring these remarks.

SHORTLY after dawn Hinton awoke, to find that his visitor had disappeared. A brief survey of his belongings also revealed the fact that three hundred ticals in Siamese currency notes were missing from the breast-pocket of his jungle tunic, and that his gold watch and chain were conspicuous by their absence.

The thefts had been comparatively easy to commit. Mr. Stranson had evidently taken a good mental note of his surroundings before turning in. Then, some time later in the night, he had stealthily risen, gone through Hinton's clothing, and departed, the roaring wind drowning all sounds of his movements.

Hinton swore beneath his breath, then turned to his boy, who had appeared at the threshold of the tent.

"And the other master?" asked the boy, surprised.

"The other master left before dawn," replied Hinton shortly. "He was anxious to catch his transport. Now bring me breakfast."

The Lao servant's features remained an expressionless mask as he hurried to the cook's tent, though inwardly he was aware of a strangeness in these events.

"Wooi," he whispered to the dusky cook bending over the pots, "I think the man who come to the master last night a very bad man."

"It is nought to do with us," returned the cook, handing the boy a dish. "Take this to the master."

A moment later Hinton sat down to the tinned bacon and musty eggs that served him for a meal, and as he ate his eyes were stern. So, he reflected, his friend Mr. Stranson had obtained his passage-money to Australia after all, though not quite in the manner advised. He, Hinton, could, of course, easily ride off and overtake the thief before he reached the head of the railway, but to do this would be to give away everything to the natives and lower the prestige of the white man.

And, Hinton frowned, the scoundrel had actually counted upon his reasoning thus; consequently the fellow would in all probability be even now sauntering along through the quiet forest glades, a smile on his lips and that mocking light dancing more than ever in his eyes.

"Hell!" muttered John Hinton as, the breakfast at an end, he rose to prepare for elephant inspection. "He's got me fairly beat!"

EXACTLY nine months later Hinton was seated one evening in his main camp in the forest, when his boy approached him with news that a great white lord was nearing the camp. Hinton, mindful of a certain previous incident, opened no bottle of whisky this time, but awaited events.

He need not have feared, however, for presently there rolled into the clearing two magnificent baggage elephants, followed by a long string of carrier coolies. A Forest Officer at least, thought Hinton as he watched them unload, or possibly—

He thought no further, for at the rear of the procession there appeared the figure of Mr. Albert Ernest Stranson, attired in brand-new jungle-kit surmounted by a spotless white topee that gleamed to high Heaven.

"The devil!" exclaimed Hinton as he gazed at the vision saunter jauntily across the grass towards him.

"Wrong again," said Mr. Stranson cheerfully, striding into the tent. "In me behold, not his Satanic Majesty, but one Stranson, reformed drunkard, beachcomber and thief."

"Take a seat, but not too literally," said Hinton grimly.

Stranson laughed at the soft impeachment and complied. He then drew certain articles from his pocket and placed them on the camp-table that stood between the two men.

Hinton picked them up. They were his gold watch and chain and three hundred and fifteen ticals in currency notes.

"I think fifteen ticals represents fair interest on three hundred for nine months. Do you agree, Mr. Hinton?"

"Certainly."

"And now for my tale, though first perhaps a very small drink—"

A cork popped, Mr. Stranson drank, then cleared his throat:

"To begin from when I last saw you," said he. "With the three hundred ticals that I borrowed from you, I took your advice and shipped to Australia, where, believe me or believe me not, I found that romantic fiction paled to nothing before what awaited me. The aged parents wept round my neck, and after the sob-stuff was over, they took pleasure in informing me that during my absence an obscure aunt had died and left me most of her fortune."

"A good sum, I suppose," said Hinton, thinking of the magnificent transport.

"Twenty thousand pounds!"

During the pause that followed this piece of information a perspiring coolie burst into the tent and handed John Hinton an envelope. Hinton tore it open, read the letter inside, then placed it in his pocket, and dismissed the coolie.

"Nothing serious, I hope?" ventured Stranson, who had noted the obvious haste of the coolie.

"No," replied his companion. "Only a letter from my manager in Bangkok, wanting an immediate reply. But that can wait for the moment. Go on with your story. You'd got to the twenty thousand pounds part of it."

Stranson coughed, and for once appeared nervous and ill-at-ease. "Look here, I hope you'll excuse the sob-stuff, but I don't mind saying that after I'd come into that fortune I began to think pretty hard, and my thoughts weren't always pleasant. Not only had I stolen cash from you, but I'd done something far worse. I'd bolted, given the game away to your natives, and lowered the prestige of the white man. But how the devil was I to make amends? I'd still got your watch and chain—I'd kept that in case hard times awaited me in Australia—and I could, of course, post it back to you together with the equivalent of the money I had stolen. But that wouldn't get over the prestige business, so at last I decided, as money was nothing now to me, that I'd come back with a transport any prince would envy."

"H'm," breathed Hinton thoughtfully.

"There was also another reason for my wishing to return."

"What was that?"

"I wanted to show you I wasn't afraid to look you in the face again, Hinton," said Stranson directly. "Well, now that I've got everything off my chest, we'd better change the subject."

"But how," said the other, who still looked thoughtful, "how did you obtain your elephant transport?"

"Hired it at the head of the railway in Lakon Lampang from a Chink. Name of Check Fung. Know him?"

Hinton nodded.

"And now," Stranson glanced round, to see that his tent had been set up for the night, "I'd be glad if you would dine with me, as I've got to be off early tomorrow, for the aged parents will grow restless if I stay away too long."

A quarter of an hour later, in Stranson's magnificent tent, Hinton was regaled to a meal that lived long in his memory. Tinned delicacies followed one another with bewildering rapidity, accompanied by wines of the choicest vintage, though Stranson himself, true to his new-found rôle, drank but sparingly.

When the meal was over, Hinton excused himself and disappeared out of the tent, to return ten minutes later with an envelope in his hand.

"You're travelling via Bangkok, I take it," he asked his companion.

Stranson nodded.

"I've a letter here to my manager in Bangkok in reply to the one I received this evening. Now it's an important letter and I don't want to trust it to the post. So will you deliver it personally to my manager in his office? Anyone will tell you the way there. It will be no great imposition, I assure you."

"Right." The note changed hands, then Stranson stood up and faced the elder man.

"Hinton," said he, "I'll say good-bye now, for I see you want to turn in, and I'll probably be off tomorrow before you're up, though not in the same circumstances as before, thank God."

"No, thank God," repeated the elder man.

"Hinton—" Stranson's tones became pleading, almost pathetic. "You—you do believe in me now, don't you?"

Hinton looked at him steadily. For once the mocking laughter in the eyes was absent, and instead the soul of the man himself shone through.

"Stranson," said the other earnestly, as he grasped the outstretched hand, "I am pleased and proud to have met you."

And such was their parting.

STRANSON, having reached Lakon Lampang, returned the hired elephants and transport to Check Fung, their owner, after which he boarded the rattling, wheezy train bound south for Bangkok.

Two days later, on a stifling afternoon, he arrived in Siam's capital, and four o'clock found him sauntering down the dusty, reeking main road of the town. After a while he came to a large saloon bar, whereupon he halted and drew out of his trouser pocket a silver tical. Now the day was very hot indeed, and with this tical he could buy a large bottle of iced beer. Nevertheless he showed a strange reluctance to enter the welcome coolness of the bar, since it held for him highly unpleasant memories.

Standing thus, Stranson's brain winged back through the past nine months. He remembered that first train journey down from the north with the stolen notes in his pocket, and how John Hinton's steady grey eyes had haunted him the whole way from Lakon to Bangkok. Those eyes had seemed to tell him that he, Albert Ernest Stranson, small, miserable, insignificant, had by his action endangered the prestige of men who were infinitely greater than he.

Thus it came to pass that after a week's remorse Stranson decided he would do his best to make good, if only for their sake. The decision was one thing; the carrying out of it another. Good, decent jobs were none too easy to obtain, and eventually, after many fruitless quests, he was given the post of barman in the saloon before which he now stood. It was hardly a job for a gentleman, true, but it was at least a straight and honest one.

So in this bar, for eight weary months, Stranson had sweated amongst the bottles. From early morn till late at night he had served out drinks for thirsty men, without so much as sipping the dregs of a glass himself. For eight weary months, though he possessed a gold watch and chain and most of the three hundred ticals he had stolen, he well-nigh starved in order that he might, not only return the money with interest, but save sufficient to enable him to restore his lost prestige in the eyes of Hinton's natives.

But now—well—that part of his life was over. Remained? No, he couldn't face that infernal bar again. Too much damned hard work, and why work when he'd got nothing particular to live for? He'd go back to the same old gin-sodden round as before, he would, for the miming, the grimacing, and the drinks that followed weren't so bad when all was said and done.

Meanwhile he'd start in with a drink right now, he decided, as he fingered his last remaining tical. He therefore made a move towards an adjoining bar, but at the entrance he paused in his stride to mop his streaming brow, for the heat in the road was terrific. As he pulled the tattered handkerchief from his pocket a white object fluttered to the ground, and he stooped to pick it up.

Jove, it was that letter for Hinton's Bangkok manager, and he'd forgotten all about it! But, he frowned, the Company's offices were a long way down the road in all probability, and if he wished to deliver the letter before they closed he would be obliged to hire a rickshaw. Now a rickshaw would cost one tical, which was all he possessed, while if he posted the letter the stamp would only cost him a few satangs and leave him plenty over for the beer.

For a while he stood irresolute, then he suddenly swung on his heel, and walking out into the sun-drenched street again, hailed a rickshaw.

"I'm a fool," he muttered, after giving

the perspiring coolie the necessary directions, "but that old chap's face gets me somehow, and I gave him my word."

Twenty minutes later Stranson gave the last of his money to the rickshaw man and then entered the imposing premises of the Siamese Timber Company. There, after a suitable delay, he was admitted to the manager, to whom he handed the note.

"Sign here, please," said the manager after reading the contents.

"What's that?" exclaimed Stranson, startled.

"Well you are A. E. Stranson, aren't you?" snapped the manager a trifle peevishly, for he was a busy man.

The other intimated that he had always understood that such was the case.

"Then for God's sake take the cash and sign the receipt for it. I don't know what you've done for Hinton, and don't care, but in this note he directs me to pay you the sum of three hundred and fifteen ticals and debit his account. He also adds that I'm to see that you damned well take the money."

"And," continued the manager to himself in an undertone, "talking of Hinton, it's time I wrote to him. Haven't sent him a letter for weeks, come to think of it."

Five minutes later Stranson, in a somewhat bemused condition, sought the outer air.

"Snakes," he muttered, as he walked slowly towards the main road, "however could the old chap have known?"

Then after a pause he added: "Well, he knew all right, and what's more the old devil has got me beat this time, for what else can I do with his damned money other than go back to Australia and make good after all? It's a nuisance, but I suppose it's up to me to do it."

And he did.

NOW amongst the files of John Hinton's correspondence there is one called the "Curiosity" file, because it contains many strange, pidgin-English letters received by him from time to time. The most treasured of all these letters is a certain note he was given by a sweaty coolie on the night he dined with one Albert Ernest Stranson. It is in the handwriting of a certain Check Fung, a large Chinese dealer living in Lakon Lampang, and it runs as follows:

"Honored Sir,

Please I am in much trouble about my elefants. Please, honored sir, things happen just like this. Two days ago a white lord come to me whom I do not know. He badly dressed, but want to hire two of my best elefants, much camp furniture, clothes and crockery, also coolies many persons. He say he wish go visit the Lord Hinton, and ask how much? I say six hundred ticals, and he give me four hundred and fifty, which not so bad after all. Then he take elefants and go. After he gone I think much, for I not understand why he pay much money for such a short journey. Then I think, perhaps he steal my elefants. I very much afraid, so I go to railway station, and the big man of the station he tell me that white man come up from Bangkok in third class carriage. So he certainly very, very poor man, for other white lords, do they not all go first class? Then I afraid even more, but not know what to do, for maybe he good, honest white lord after all. So I send this letter by fast coolie to your honor. Please, your Honor, if the white man come to you, you see he not steal my elefants but return them to me as they were in the absolute original.

Your Honors abedient humble servant,

CHECK FUNG."

A second of these tales appears next issue. It is "The Fighting of Giants," an adventure with the mighty elephants of the teak forest.

Part Four

Preceding events briefly retold

The Desert Moon Ranch, Nevada, is the scene of a mysterious murder. On the ranch at the time is a curious collection of individuals. Each has an important bearing on the story and so we shall list them as follows:

Mary Magin, the middle-aged housekeeper who tells the story.

Sam Stanley, the wealthy owner of the ranch, a mild and lovable giant of a man.

John, his adopted son, an upstanding young man of twenty-five.

Martha, the adopted daughter, twenty-one years old, physically well and attractive but with the mentality of a child of five.

Mrs. Ricker, who came to the ranch to take care of John and Martha. A strange and silent woman.

Hubert Hand, who came to the ranch years ago to recover his health and has stayed ever since.

Chadwick Caufield, a born musician, a ventriloquist and so entertaining Sam Stanley won't let him leave the ranch.

The Canneziano twins, Danielle (Danny) and Gabrielle (Gaby) who are alike in face and figure but are entirely different in manners, dress and disposition. Danny is sweet, quiet, well bred. Gaby is loud, racy and has a bad temper.

In the past, Margarita, Sam's wife, ran away with an Italian puncher, Canneziano. Sam got a divorce, and Canneziano and Sam's divorced wife were married. The twins were the fruit of this marriage, and after their mother's death, Sam, although he despised their father, helped the twins financially and otherwise.

At the opening of the story, the girls, now twenty-four, have arrived from Europe for their first visit to the ranch since they were eight years old.

Danny and John are much attached to each other and in two weeks are engaged.

Gaby flirts with John but cannot lure him from Danny. John dislikes Gaby as do all the others except Chad and Hand.

Hand makes idle love to Gaby, and she reciprocates in kind. Chad is hopelessly in love with Gaby but she pays no attention to him. Martha dislikes Gaby with a violent, childish aversion.

During the twins' two-months' stay at the ranch, Mary has overheard them talking, and learns that they are hunting for something on the Desert Moon—something connected with revenge. She also overhears Mrs. Ricker tell Hand that she would like to kill Gaby. John himself has told Mary that he would like to strangle Gaby for making Danny unhappy.

On the afternoon of July fourth, when all the help have left the ranch to attend a rodeo, Gaby comes downstairs and goes out, presumably for a walk. Shortly after, Danny calls and learns that Gaby has left and comes down to the living-room herself. The entire household is present in the living-room except: John, who has gone to Rattail for the mail, Martha, who is out feeding the rabbits, and Gaby, who has just left for a walk.

Martha soon comes in, exhibiting a gold bracelet which she says Gaby has just given her. Martha has always coveted this bracelet.

All remain in the house a couple of hours. Then Mary starts supper. Danny sets the table.

The Desert Moon MYSTERY

An Enthralling Story of a Murder on a Western Ranch

By KAY CLEAVER STRAHAN

Mrs. Ricker remains in the living-room and Martha goes to sleep there on the sofa. Sam, Chad and Hand go out to the barn to milk the cows.

Then all sit down to supper wondering where Gaby is and why John hasn't returned from town.

As they are finishing supper John drives in, going around to the back door. He insists on going upstairs to clean before eating. He remains upstairs quite a while, and when he comes down he refuses any food, saying it is too hot to eat.

By this time all are worried about Gaby. Everyone except Mrs. Ricker and Martha goes looking for her. After searching for an hour they are forced back to the ranch by a heavy shower. While they are closing windows and doors Mary, the methodical housekeeper, remembers that the attic windows are wide open. She sends Chad up to close them.

Chad goes upstairs and shouts back that the attic door is locked. Mary goes up to see and finds that Chad's report is true. Chad goes downstairs to get a key.

Mary, standing there waiting, puts a hand into her pocket and discovers a key. It fits the attic door and she opens it.

About half way up the stairs is Gaby, lying in a huddle. Mary tries to scream but cannot. Then on the carpet she sees something that shocks her. Dropped all over the beaded bag, lying there, are ashes from Sam's pipe. Horror-struck she sweeps the ashes up and puts them into her pocket. Just then Chad returns.

"Call the others," Mary cries, "Gaby is here—murdered!" Then she faints.

While the others are reviving Mary, Chad goes out of the house and shoots himself. He leaves a note confessing to Gaby's murder.

All would like to believe Chad's confession but Sam will not accept it as true because he was with Chad all afternoon.

The coroner arrives and his inquest yields only the formal verdict of "killed by person or persons unknown." It is thought that Gaby had been dead for two or three hours before her body was discovered.

The clues are many, confusing, and point in turn to everyone in the household.

A brief note is found in Gaby's pocket saying that she expected to be murdered. It also requests Danny to take her body to San Francisco to be cremated. Danny shows Mary a code letter which Gaby had received from Europe two days before her death. But Mary can make nothing of it. Then there is the key Mary found in her pocket. It is not the key to the attic but an old passkey.

Hand says he suspects John because John alone is unable to account for every minute of his time on the afternoon of the murder.

Then John tells the story of the twins before they came to the ranch. Gaby had been an actress in Europe, but only to cloak her operations with a blackmailing gang. The chief of this gang, Lewis Bauermont, was Gaby's lover. One night he showed the twins a letter he had received from their father, Daniel Canneziano, who was then serving a prison term. Bauermont made a story out of this letter. He said that he and Canneziano had robbed a train three years before and had hidden the loot on the Desert

Moon. Danny believed him and in order to get Gaby away from the bad crowd she was traveling with in Europe she persuaded her sister to come to the Desert Moon to look for the buried money. The code letter Gaby had received on July second was from this Bauermont.

Then, as the case becomes more complicated than ever with new suspicions, Mrs. Ricker discovers that Martha, who was thought to be sleeping on the sofa, is dead! Sam breaks down and believes that he has killed Martha by forcing her to take a very strong sleeping powder. Mrs. Ricker, heartbroken, discloses the fact that she and Hand are Martha's parents. The two had met years before in San Francisco, just after Hand, then a young man, had ended a prison term for forgery.

Mrs. Ricker has something else to confess. She says she believes that Martha has been her instrument in killing Gaby, whom she hated. With the seed of this hatred in her heart Martha probably had overpowered Gaby at the rabbit hut. Chad had left the barn, found her there, and then had carried Gaby's body up the back way to the attic, scattering ashes from Sam's pipe upon the bag next to the body in order to clear Martha, a mental child, of the guilt. Some of the household wish to believe this story; others deny its truth vigorously.

Shortly after, Danny leaves for San Francisco with Gaby's body.

While confusion is spreading through the household Sam receives a telegram from Lynn MacDonald, a San Francisco crime specialist of repute, offering her services on the case. Sam wires her to come on.

The doorbell rings. It is Daniel Canneziano! He has come to pay a long visit. Sam recovers from his amazement and asks Canneziano about Bauermont and the train robbery. The puncher replies that he knows Bauermont but that they had never pulled the robbery. He asks to see the code letter. Mary goes upstairs to get the letter and finds someone in Gaby's room.

CHAPTER XXXVII

IT WAS Mrs. Ricker. She turned to me, and apologized, quietly, for having startled me. "I was looking at these things," she went on. "They know. They were there. If only one of them could speak—"

"I thought," I am sure I spoke too tartly, "that you knew. You said a while ago that you did."

"Sam doesn't believe it," she answered. "Doesn't that give me, her mother, a right to doubt, if I can?"

I was all out of sorts. "It would have been better to have doubted it, in the first place," I said.

"I know. But I didn't—I couldn't. But Sam does. And then, that man coming into the house tonight—I can't explain it; but, some way, he made all of us, even Hubert, seem so good. The house itself felt, to me—you understand—good. As if any wicked thing would have to come into it from the outside, from far away, just as he came into it tonight. Perhaps you can understand my feeling?"

I did understand. I had had that feeling of drawing close to the others and away from him, the minute he had come into the room. But I was so put out with her, for startling me, and for being in Gaby's room, anyway, poking around—though land knows she had a right to be there, and I might have done the same thing myself, with my lists of clues, and so on—that I just said I supposed so, and picked up the letter, at the same time looking over the other things on the table to be sure nothing was missing.

"Perhaps," she said, "I should not have come in here? I suppose, when the detective comes, he—she would like to see the room as nearly as possible undisturbed. Do you think it would be a good plan to lock it, and to give the key to Sam, until she does come?"

She went around with me, while I locked the door on the inside. We had to lock the door in Danny's room, too, since the two rooms had only the curtained doorway between them. We went into the hall through Danny's room. I locked that door after us. She told me goodnight and went to her own room. I went downstairs, and gave the key I had taken and the letter to Sam.

"Wise idea, Mary," he said, when I told him that I had locked the rooms. "I suppose Canneziano would tell you, though, that 'locked doors do not a prison make.'" He handed the letter to him.

"Looks rather confusing, doesn't it?" Canneziano said, when he had unfolded and straightened the pages. "Still, these things are generally quite simple. What price deciphering it, Sam?"

"No price, to you," Sam answered, snapping out his words.

He returned the letter to its envelope and tossed it on the table. "Fair enough," he said.

"I fancy," he questioned, next, "that Lynn MacDonald is going to get rather a good thing out of this. Solving mysteries brings a good reward, eh?"

"That depends on her success," Sam answered.

"Yes? I understand that she takes jobs on that basis quite often. It is not thoroughly approved in the best criminal circles. Too much incentive to frame a case. However, that theory of framing has been over exploited. My proposition, cards on the table, is this: If I beat the lady to it, discover the murderer before she does, will you pay me what you have agreed to pay her?"

"Canneziano," Sam said, "get this. Get it now. I'll pay you not one red cent for anything. Not one red cent."

"Fair enough," Canneziano repeated. "And my mistake. Undoubtedly, I should have worded it differently. For instance—What will you pay me not to discover the murderer on the Desert Moon Ranch?"

A week ago, Sam would have got up and kicked him out through the door for that question. This evening Sam sat still and looked him over, sort of sliding his eyes up and down over his smooth dapperness. Finally he drawled, "Go as far as you like, Canneziano. Only—you won't get anywhere you'd like to be, not on that line."

"Presently, perhaps," Canneziano answered. "No hurry."

I'll be switched if Sam didn't sit there and murmur, mildly to himself, " 'Said the carpenter.' "

CHAPTER XXXVIII

LYNN MACDONALD

ON FRIDAY afternoon, late, I went with John and Sam down to Rattail to meet the train. When it came thundering, snorting up, I thought of the last time that Sam and I had met a train together, and of how our entire world had changed in the two months. Was it going to keep on changing, I wondered. I could not bear to look into the past; I found that I did not dare to try to think into the future.

Just before the train stopped, with its usual roar of protest against Rattail, Clarence Pette swung off of it. He came over to us with a timid air, like an animal, just learning to eat out of a person's hand. He took no risks, until Sam had greeted him, real pleasantly, and polite.

"Miss MacDonald is on this train," he said to Sam and me. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Not a thing, if you are positive that she is Miss MacDonald, except to take your fifty—here it is—and vamoose."

"I'm positive. Thanks. Here she comes now."

I looked up to see her coming. I could hardly believe my eyes. I don't know what I had expected; but I surely had not expected anything to get off that smoke-dirty train, in the middle of a Nevada desert, on a sweltering hot July evening, that looked as she did.

In the first place, in her pongee silk dress with coat to match, and perky little green hat, she looked as if she had been fresh picked, in the last nice California garden, and had been kept under glass, on ice ever since. But that was only a part of it. She looked, too, like linen sheets feel, at the end of a long hard day; sheets that have been hand-washed, and sun-dried, and dew-dampened, and ironed smooth as satin.

She was tall; taller than most women, and with weight enough to look durable and useful, but not a mite fat. She had eyes that were as gray as pussy-willows, and that did no monkey-tricks of changing to green or blue; she had wavy carrot-colored hair, that was so full of life it looked as if it were trying to break the bonds of its neat, boyish bob and go floating off, on its own, to make, maybe, a tiny sunset cloud. Her nose was small; her mouth was a mite too large, showing freely in a smile her teeth, little and polished white, like a puppy's.

Coming straight from San Francisco, she used no visible cosmetics; which is much the same as if I had said, rising out of the Pacific Ocean, she was as dry as a chip.

Her voice was low and pleasant, but there was something brisk and crisp about it, and about all of her, that seemed to say plenty and plenty of time for everything, but not one precious minute to waste.

In the background, during this meeting, John and Danny had been hugging and kissing, as if the rolling train right behind them, filled with staring people, were a peaceful, flowing river and the people fishes that were swimming past. At last, to my relief, they came over to join us.

"But," Danny said, after Sam had introduced her to Miss MacDonald, and had explained why Miss MacDonald had come, "you didn't tell me that you were coming here."

"You girls get acquainted on the train?" Sam asked.

"We had breakfast together in the diner this morning," Miss MacDonald answered.

"Did you know who I was?" Danny questioned.

"It was my business to know that, wasn't it?" Miss MacDonald smiled.

"Only—why didn't you tell me?" Danny persisted.

"I don't wonder that you ask," Miss MacDonald said. "And I hope that you will forgive me for seeming unfriendly, secretive. It is, simply, that I never want my first history of the case to come from nearest relatives. Of course they feel too deeply to see clearly. Mistaken impressions are so hard to eradicate, that I go to any lengths to avoid them. If I had made myself known, this morning, Miss Canneziano, I should have had to seem more rude, and ungracious than I seemed by acting as I did. Because, please," she included all of us in her glance, "I have to ask each of you not to talk to me about the case. I should have to refuse to listen. When I need to know anything about it—I shall need to know many things—, I'll ask it, as a direct question. Until I ask for more, from you, if you will all do that, simply answer my questions, you will help me immeasurably."

"That's easy," Sam said.

"I am afraid," she answered, "that it won't be easy. And I have to make another request that won't be easy to fulfill, either. It is, that no one will question me. I am sorry to have to ask that. I am afraid that it seems as if I were trying to surround myself with a glamour of mystery—pretending to false wisdoms and acumens—"

"Not a bit of it," Sam interrupted. "'He travels the fastest who travels alone.'"

"I have always questioned that," she said. "At any rate, I don't intend to travel all alone."

"You mean you are going to take a few days to size us up, and then get some of us to help you?" Sam asked, a naive eagerness in his voice.

"Question number one," she said, and laughed, too.

CHAPTER XXXIX

A TRAP

WE HAD got into the sedan, by that time, and were riding along the Victory Highway. I declare to goodness, a sound that was pretty much like a ripple of giggles went tittering around. It did us good, every last one of us. It was antiseptic, as laughs so often are. Just as I was thinking how much more wholesome everything felt, since I had shaken hands with Miss MacDonald, Danny, who was riding in the front seat beside John, spoiled it all by emitting a shriek; it was not a very loud one, but it was thick with horror and repulsion.

John talked to her for a minute or two in a low voice, and then explained, over his shoulder to us, that he had told her about "that man" being on the ranch.

"Uncle Sam," Danny pleaded, "do I have to see him?"

"Well, Danny," Sam apologized, "I'm right down sorry about it; but, you see, he is staying on the place. We'll keep him out of your way, as much as we can."

"Why can't he stay, if he has to stay at all, down at the outfit's quarters?" Danny asked.

"We'll see what Miss MacDonald says. I thought, maybe, she'd like to have him where she could keep an eye on him. I kind of wanted, myself, to keep an eye on him."

Danny put her head on John's shoulder and began to cry; weak, choking little sobs that hurt like having to watch a sick baby.

"Poor little thing," Miss MacDonald said to me, her voice lowered and rich with sympathy.

I thought she would ask me what the trouble was, and who the man was that was causing it. Instead, still speaking low, to me, she said, "So often I get completely at odds with my profession. And then I hear some woman crying like that, or something else as heartbreaking comes to me, and I know that I am justified. Not because I shall discover this criminal. That won't help this little girl, greatly; but because I am one of an army that is fighting crime."

I didn't say it; but I felt like telling her that she seemed like a whole army herself—an army with banners.

I leaned forward and tried to soothe Danny; told her that we would all do what we could to keep him away from her, and to make it easy for her.

"It can't be made easy," she answered, "you can't keep him away from me. I won't see him, I tell you. I've been so homesick—and now to come home to this. I can't see him. I won't—"

Miss MacDonald, who the minute before, had seemed all pity for Danny, began, suddenly, to talk right through and over her sobs, to Sam; to talk in rather a loud voice about stock raising, paying no more attention to Danny's troubles than she paid to the humming of the motor.

I sat and sulked and nursed my disappointment. If I had been a man—which praise the Lord I am not—it would have been a case of love at first sight with me toward Lynn MacDonald. But now I told myself bitterly that I had been a fool to expect real womanly sympathy and kindness from a person in her profession. Ferreting out criminals would make anyone as hard as nails. I was right, in a way.

Not until Danny had quieted down, and had turned to us with stammered apologies and attempted explanations, did Miss MacDonald ask, "Who is this man?"

"Dreadful as it must seem to you," Danny answered, "he is my father. But he has brought sorrow, and fear and trouble to my mother, and to my sister and to me, whenever he came near us. He is a wicked man."

"Wouldn't it be possible," Miss MacDonald turned to Sam, "to have someone go ahead of us to the house, and ask him to keep to his own room, this evening?"

"Well—" Sam hesitated. "But Danny will have to meet him, sooner or later."

"Better later, in this case, I should say. She will be rested tomorrow. Possibly, too, it would be easier for her if their first meeting could be in private. Shouldn't you rather see him alone, just at first, Miss Canneziano?"

"Oh, no!" Danny exclaimed. "I hope I need never see him alone. Please—don't any of you ever leave me alone with him, not for a minute, if you can help it."

For all the fuss she had made about it, I will say that Danny did very well when we all went into the house and she saw Canneziano, standing over by the east windows, smoking a cigaret.

"What-ho, Dan," he said, smiling his smooth, smirking smile at her. "You are looking seedy. Bad times around here, lately."

She didn't go near him. She edged closer to John, but she answered, looking at him straight and lifting her chin in a pretty, dignified way she had, "Very, very bad times indeed." She and John walked through the room to the stairway, and up the steps, and out of sight.

Canneziano stood watching them, a dark, ugly look on his face. "There's filial affection for you," he said. And then, with a half laugh, as he lit another cigaret, and shook the flame from the match. "The girl is a fool."

CHAPTER XL

THE MISSING BOX

MISS MACDONALD came down to breakfast in the morning, trim and white as a new candle. She ate heartily, complimenting the food. She asked after Danny, who had not come down for breakfast. She talked about how splendidly the high altitude and the marvelous Nevada air made her feel. She told us, who had lived here all our lives and didn't know it, that the air in Nevada was supposed to be the best in the entire United States for growing things. And, all the time, either not noticing, or pretending not to notice, how we were all hanging on her every word, and watching her every movement.

I guessed the others were doing as I was doing; watching for penetrating glances, and listening for catches in her innocent questions. But, at that, I blushed for them; particularly for John, who sat and stared at her as if she were something he had to learn by heart, before the meal was over.

When we had finally finished breakfast, she asked Sam if she might detain him. I stayed on, when the others had left the dining-room. She said pointedly, though politely and to Sam, not to me, that she wanted to speak to him, alone.

I took myself off. But the open window in the pass pantry was too big a temptation; so I went in there, softly, and stood far back and to the side.

Her very first words took me right off

my feet. "Mr. Stanley," she questioned, "do you trust your housekeeper?"

"Mary?" Sam drawled. "Well, now, I don't know as to trusting—"

I don't know how to express what my feelings were when I heard Sam say that. Pulverized is a word that would edge it, I guess—as if I had been caught in a sausage machine, and ground up into small pieces, each one hurting on its own hook.

"But," Sam continued, "if Mary was going on a long journey, to indefinite foreign parts, and felt the need of my right eye to take along with her, I'd loan it to her for as long as she wanted it—no questions asked. I can't say that I'd go much further than that, though."

I was whole again, and warm and glowing. Sam, the old ninny, getting his dander up, and to a beautiful woman like that, just because she had asked him a simple question.

She laughed; a cheery, escaping sort of laugh, like something with bright wings suddenly flying loose.

"Come back into the dining-room, then, Mrs. Magin," she called to me. "You can hear better in here."

I came in, a mite shamefacedly. "It was my overweening curiosity," I explained.

Sam murmured, " 'Satiable.' "

"I like people with curiosity," she said. "I understand them, too; because, I suppose, I am one of the most curious persons in the world. Another thing, I have never found a truly curious person who was a wicked person. As much as any generalization can be made, all criminals are egotists. Curiosity means interest in the affairs of others. Of course, one has to be able to discriminate between innate curiosity, and the slyness of self-protection. But, forgive me, Mr. Stanley, I am chattering away your time. Now then:

(Later we became accustomed to that brisk professional opening of hers, that "Now then," as a signal for getting right down to business, but it was as surprizing, heard for the first time, as biting your tongue.)

"Gabrielle Canneziano was last seen, alive, where and at about what hour?"

We told her.

"Did she seem at ease, happy, untroubled?"

Sam said, "I was playing chess. I didn't notice."

"I did," I said. "She was unhappy, troubled, and frightened."

"Frightened? Are you positive that you had that impression at the time?"

"Yes. I spoke to Mrs. Ricker about it, right then."

"Did she agree with you, then?"

"She didn't say."

"Did Gabrielle Canneziano speak to any one of you, as she walked through the room?"

I told her about Gaby's gesture to Chad, and about him following her to the porch and talking to her there.

"Chadwick Caufield? The man who killed himself when the body was found?"

"Yes."

"Did he leave the porch with her?"

"No. He came straight back into the house."

"What other members of the household were in the room at that time?"

Sam told her.

"That leaves her sister, and your son and daughter as the only members of the household who were absent at the time. How long before Martha Stanley returned to the house?"

Sam said, "I was playing chess. But I know it wasn't long."

"It wasn't more than five or six minutes," I said.

"How long before Danielle Canneziano came downstairs?"

I told her about Danny's calling after Gaby. "It wasn't much more than ten minutes after she called, not fifteen minutes, I am sure, before Danny came downstairs."

"Since you are a cook," she said, "you probably have more than the average ability in estimating time."

"Good cooks," I told her, "don't estimate. They know. When I'm boiling three minute eggs, I use my watch, and always have."

"At least, then," she said, "you know how difficult it is to deal accurately with minutes. With every desire and reason to be honest, five minutes, in the testimony of a witness, may be anything from two minutes to seventeen; ten minutes, anything from five minutes to twenty-three; twenty minutes, anything from nine minutes to forty-five; forty-five minutes, anything from twenty-odd to an hour and a half. Now then——"

She went on with her questioning. We had finished breakfast at eight thirty o'clock. I felt that she knew everything that Sam and I knew about the case, and, probably, a deal more.

She knew about the two girls searching for something.

She knew about Gaby's getting the code letter; about her peculiar actions afterwards. She knew about the quarrel with Sam.

She knew about John having gone to Rattail for medicine that Danny said she had not sent for.

She knew about him taking four hours, instead of two to make the trip; about the reasons he had given for that; about him going straight upstairs, the back way, and staying there for half an hour. In answer to her questions, it was Sam and not I who told her about John's acting so bothered and troubled when he came down for supper.

She knew about all of our actions between five and six o'clock. She knew that Sam was unwilling to swear that Hubert had been in the barn during that entire time. Sam insisted upon telling her about Danny's suspicions concerning himself; that he had left Chad, the ventriloquist, in the barn to hoodwink Hubert, and had gone off somewhere.

She knew about me asking Chad to close the attic; about the locked door; the key in my pocket. She knew that I had found the body, and had stopped to clean away Sam's pipe ashes.

She had seen the note that Chad had left. She had compared it, through her magnifying glass, with other specimens of his handwriting. She had stated, positively, that the note had been written by the same hand that had written the names and jokes under the pictures in his kodak album. She had spent ten minutes, or more, looking at these pictures. Then she had asked Sam to explain, in detail, why he had entirely discounted Chad's note of confession.

Sam said, "The body was cold and stiff when we found it. That is proof, isn't it, that she had been dead more than an hour?"

"If you are certain of that it is positive proof that she had been dead much longer than one hour."

"I am certain. Well, until seven o'clock that boy had not been out of my sight for one minute, after Gaby walked through the room, alive, for us all to see her, at four o'clock."

"Twice," Miss MacDonald objected, "you have told me that you could not answer a question because, at the time, you were absorbed in your chess game. How, then, can you be certain that Chadwick Caufield was not out of the living-room for a short time, say fifteen minutes, between four and five o'clock?"

"Because he was playing the piano all that time."

"You are certain that you would have noticed it, had he stopped playing?"

"Certain. He was spoiling my game, and driving me half crazy with his noise. I kept hoping that he would stop. Kept forcing myself not to ask him to stop."

"Why shouldn't you ask him, if it was annoying you to that extent, in your own home?"

"Well, it was Chad's home, too. He had as much right, I reckon, to play his music as I had to play my chess game."

I liked the look Miss MacDonald sidled at me when Sam said that.

"You, too, are sure," she questioned me, "that Chadwick Caufield was at the piano during that entire hour?"

"I know it."

"What sort of music was he playing?"

"He was improvising. It was happy, cheerful, sort of crooning music—if you know what I mean."

"Yes. He did not seem worried, depressed?"

"Not a bit. He seemed happier than usual, I thought."

She went on with her questions. They brought us to Martha's death. She took what seemed like a long time asking us questions about Martha's health. Had she ever complained of dizziness? Shortness of breath? Indigestion? And all sorts of other seemingly unimportant things.

"Where," she finally came back to the powders, again, "was this sleeping medicine purchased?"

Sam told her in San Francisco, with a doctor's prescription.

"Have you still some of them left, in the original box?"

"A few, I think."

"Good. Will you get it for me, Mr. Stanley?"

"I'll get it," I said, and my opinion of her as a detective was lowered, then and there. If she had not found out, by this time, that it was useless to send a man to look for anything anywhere, but, most particularly in a bathroom medicine closet, she still had too much to learn.

I had seen the powder box, left out of place on the table, the morning of the fifth of July, when I had gone into the hall bathroom. I had picked it up, out of habit, and replaced it in the medicine closet. I thought that I could put my hand right on it.

I could not. When I opened the mirror door, the box was not to be seen. I searched and searched. I might have spared myself the trouble. From that day to this, the box, with the remaining powders in it, has never been found.

CHAPTER XLI

QUESTIONS

"I WAS afraid of that," Miss MacDonald said, when I returned with my information and nothing else to the dining-room. "Now then: Would it be possible for you to remember who last took one of these powders, and when, with no ill effects?"

"Danny and Mary each took one the night of the fourth, when Martha did," Sam answered. "I've asked them about it, and both of them say that they did not feel queer at all, afterwards. They were both wide awake in the morning."

"My word!" said Miss MacDonald.

"I think," I offered, "that something was all wrong with Martha's heart before she took the powder. She acted sleepy, stupid, all afternoon."

"From noon on, you mean?"

"No—At least, I didn't notice until later in the afternoon. Mrs. Ricker said that she had a hard time keeping her awake between seven and eight o'clock."

"I see. Mrs. Ricker did not take one of the sleeping powders that night?"

"She didn't need one," Sam explained. "She is naturally calm. She didn't go all to pieces like the other girls did."

"And yet, I have gathered that she was far from calm when her daughter died?"

"She went clear, raving crazy," I said.

"Yes. Now then—"

"Hold on a minute," Sam said. "I think that you think, from the questions you have been asking, that the sleeping powder, like I gave the other girls, would not have caused Martha's death. Now I want to know—"

"I am sorry, Mr. Stanley," she interrupted, "but I have explained that I can not answer questions."

"Suppose I insist on a few common sense questions being answered, right now?"

"You can't do that. You can hamper me in my progress. You can dismiss me from the case, right now. But you aren't going to do either, are you?"

"I won't hamper you, if I can help it. I won't dismiss you, as you say, now, either. It wouldn't be right, without giving you a chance, after you came all the way up here, and you know it. That's why you should try to be reasonable."

"I am trying to be reasonable, Mr. Stanley." Her smile at Sam, just then, looked as if she might be trying to be something a mite more charming than reasonable, besides. "Now then—"

She was off again, leading us with her questions, through Mrs. Ricker's confession and her suspicions of Martha.

"After Martha came into the house with the bracelet," she asked, "was she out of the room again within the hour; or even within the second hour, between five and six?"

"She was not out between four and five," I said. "She might have been any place, for all I know, between five and six. I was in the kitchen."

"Did you have any particular reason for watching her between four and five o'clock?"

"No."

"Then, I am afraid that you cannot be positive that she did not leave the room."

"I am positive," I insisted. "There weren't any goings nor comings. We all stayed right in the room. It was too hot to move around. I know that Martha did not leave the room. She sat beside Chad on the piano bench, for a while. She sat on the arm of Sam's chair, watching the chess game—"

"Gosh!" Sam said. "I remember that, now. She was fooling with my hair. I kept smelling the blacking on her shoes."

"You couldn't have," I said. "Because, Sam, she was wearing white shoes."

"She used some preparation to clean her

white shoes, I suppose?" Miss MacDonald asked.

"Some stuff called 'White-o-clean.' We all use it."

She asked for the bottle. When I brought it, she smelled of it, and asked Sam to. "Is that the odor you noticed?" she questioned.

"Nothing like it."

"Now then——"

"Hold on," Sam said. "I've got two things to tell you that you are overlooking, and I know that they are both mighty important."

"What are they?"

"The first one is this: Gaby had lived here close to two months. Martha had never harmed her. Does it stand to reason that, on the very day Gaby was afraid she was going to be killed, Martha would do it? There's too much coincidence in that, isn't there?"

"I think so," she answered, breaking her rule for once, at least. "Though we can not ever discount coincidence. In the first place, what appears to be coincidence usually proves not to be coincidence at all, in the end. In the second place, genuine coincidences are much more frequent than is generally supposed, or admitted. But, Mr. Stanley, unless the other thing you have to tell me is a fact, and not an opinion, I am going to ask you not to tell it to me, at least not until later."

"It is straight fact."

"Very well, then?"

"I'd rather show you," Sam said. "Then you wouldn't have to take my word for it. Will you come out to the rabbit hutch with me?"

"But," she questioned, "can that be necessary?"

"You can judge for yourself. Martha was always trying experiments with feeding her rabbits. I guess she thought that they might like grain. Maybe they do. I don't know. Anyway, she, or someone, had tugged a half sack of grain up there. A lot of it had spilled out under the berry bushes. It is all fresh sprouted, and growing fine. Is that important, or not?"

Her brows puckered. "I'm sorry—I don't follow you."

"There wasn't a spot out there, except under those bushes, where Martha could have hidden the body. A body, even as small as Gaby's, would have smashed down and broken those fresh sprouts of grain."

"But—the body was never there."

"Mrs. Ricker said that she thought it was. We just told you."

Her mouth popped open with surprise.

"But Mr. Stanley, you couldn't have considered Mrs. Ricker's opinion seriously? Is it possible that you don't know that Gabrielle Canneziano was murdered right there on the stairs, where she fell, and where she was found?"

CHAPTER XLII

A REVELATION

"HOW IN blazes could I know it?" Sam said. "What's more, I don't believe it. I think that she was murdered outside, and carried in, afterwards."

"My word! Weren't you present when the body was moved?"

"No. I—well, I didn't care about being."

"The fingers of her right hand were clutching the stair tread with the grasp of death. Nothing can disprove that. Dead fingers cannot be made to clutch."

"How do you know that?" Sam demanded. "About her fingers, I mean."

"To prove to you," she said, after an instant's hesitation, "that my refusal to answer questions is not merely an attempt to appear wise and mysterious, I am going to answer this question.

"When I saw the body in the crematory in San Francisco—"

"What!"

"I always do that, when I can. Before I sent you my telegram, I had gone to see the body."

"Did—does Danny know that?"

"No. It might be better not to tell her. It is a necessary part of my profession. The crematory people realize that; but since people are often very sensitive about it, they prefer that the relatives should not know that they allow it. As I was saying, I saw, then, that the fingers on the right hand had been broken. The undertaker did that, you understand, in order that they might look natural to fold.

"When I had received your telegram engaging me to take the case, I telephoned to the coroner and the undertaker in Telko.

I asked them to come to the train and talk with me for the twenty minutes that the train stops in Telko. I took a drawing-room for that purpose; so we could talk undisturbed and unnoticed. That will be the reason for the day's drawing-room charge on my expense account, Mr. Stanley. I don't want you to think that I was unduly extravagant."

"Extravagant! Hell!" Sam exploded, forgetting himself. "What do I care about a drawing-room? What I want to know, is what those fellows told you, and why they didn't tell me."

"They corroborated the opinion I had formed, from the fingers, about the death clutch, among other things. I don't know why they didn't tell you that. Probably, because they assumed that you already knew it. What information I got from them, they gave with extreme reluctance, due, I think, to their long standing friendship with you, and their desire not to incriminate any member of your household. I got nothing from them—or, to put it more fairly, perhaps, they were able to tell me nothing except the facts concerning the position of the body. Those facts proved that she had been killed on the stairs, by someone who had been coming downstairs behind her. How did it happen that you, nor no member of your household, knew this?"

"As soon as I realized what had happened," Sam explained, "I cleared everybody right out and locked the door. I knew that it was necessary for the coroner to examine the body before it had been disturbed."

"How very, very sensible," Miss MacDonald said. But I did not quite like the way she said it.

"If you mean," I spoke up, "how unfeeling, I want to say that, though she had been living here for two months, she had not exactly endeared herself to any of us."

"No? I had understood that Chadwick Caufield was deeply in love with her; that Mr. Hand was more or less enamoured. There can be no doubt that her sister loved her devotedly. That leaves Mr. Stanley, his son and daughter, Mrs. Ricker and yourself, as the people to whom she had not endeared herself."

Sam and I received that in silence. It was one of those odd things that was true, but that did not sound so.

I looked at my watch and said that it was time for me to be starting to get dinner. She asked if she might help me. I thought that she was trying only to be polite, and I was making my refusal just as polite, when she interrupted me.

"Please, Mrs. Magin," she urged. "You mentioned at breakfast that you had only one inefficient girl to help you, just now. I love housework, of all sorts. And I want to get intimately acquainted with this house. The best way to do that is to work in it, isn't it? You know—you can't know a stove until you have cooked on it, nor a room until you have cleaned it. Won't you let me help you, as a special favor to me?"

Sam winked at me. "She isn't going to let you out of her sight, Mary."

Miss MacDonald tried to smile, but she made a failure of it.

"But you don't need to worry, Mary," Sam went on, "because one thing, now, is dead certain. If Gaby was murdered there on the steps, it is impossible that any member of this household could have done it. It seemed so before. But now it is sure. That clears us all."

Miss MacDonald flashed out, in one of her rarely shown tempers. "What utter nonsense," she said.

CHAPTER XLIII

A SHADOW

WHEN it came to helping in the kitchen, that girl was more help in five minutes that Belle, Sadie and Goldie, all three of them together, had been in half a day. She didn't ask questions. She didn't say where is this, and how do you that? She pitched in, as if she had been working in that kitchen with me for the past twenty years. How she knew where I kept the potatoes, where the best paring knife lived, and the particular kettle that was best for cooking the potatoes in, I don't know, and I never shall know. Most mystery stories, especially of late, have an element of the supernatural in them. I tell you, that girl's knowledge of my ways, and the manner in which she took hold in the kitchen, were as supernatural as anything ever brought to my notice. The first thing I knew, she was peeling the potatoes, and peeling them thin and clean. She didn't ask how many would be enough. When she got them peeled and washed, she put them on, in boiling water, with no inquiry as to where I kept the salt. She did not talk as she worked. I was glad of that; for, after three solid hours of conversation, I needed, badly, a silent space. I wanted to think. Those last words of hers, "utter nonsense," in answer to Sam's statement, kept ringing in my ears.

I tried to think whether there was any way a person could get upstairs without coming through the house. We had no fire escapes. There were no trees close enough to the house so that even Douglas Fairbanks could swing to an upstairs window from one of them. There were no vines growing on the house. Without about a twenty foot ladder, which we didn't have on the place, and which would be hard to go conveying about, to say nothing of disposing of it afterwards, there was not any possible way for anyone to get to the second floor of our house, except by means of the back or the front stairway.

Since Gaby had been killed on the attic stairway, and since all who knew about that sort of thing agreed that she had been dead at least two hours when we found her, she must have returned to the house sometime between four and five o'clock, and have stolen upstairs with none of us seeing or hearing her. Since she could do that, there was no reason to suppose that someone else could not have done the same thing; either going in with her at the time, or going before or after she did. I had to conclude that another person certainly had done just that; had entered the house and had gone upstairs during that hour. Who? The person whom she had been fearing? Not one of us, that seemed a certainty. And yet, Miss MacDonald had said, "nonsense."

I remembered, again, her strange, mad actions immediately after she had received the code letter. I remembered how she had looked in the hall that day, when I had told John that I thought I had seen the ghost of sin. In Gaby's note to Danny she had written that she had purposely kept her fears and her danger a secret from Danny. Undoubtedly, the secret was written in the code letter. Had she told Danny partly the truth about the contents of that letter, or had she told her falsehoods from beginning to end? Or had Danny told us only a part of the truth? Why did we all keep forgetting how Danny had tried to call Gaby back, when Gaby had started on that fatal walk?

I have said before, and I say again, I knew that Danielle Canneziano had not murdered her sister. But I knew, too, that if she had some reason, some better reason than I could conceive, for keeping quiet, for not telling everything she knew, Danny was capable of so doing. I remembered our talk in her room on the morning of the fifth of July. I remembered how she had acted when her engagement ring had slipped from her finger. I tried to turn my thoughts into different channels.

There was Chad's suicide and his confession. It could be possible that he had killed himself because he had loved Gaby. But that would not account for his confession to the crime. It could mean but one thing—a desire to shield someone. Would he have cared about shielding some unknown scoundrel who had crept into the house and killed the girl who Chad loved? Had Chad, then, mistakenly suspicioned Martha, or Sam, or John, and killed himself and left the note to aid one of them? Not likely. Men do not kill themselves, leaving a written confession to a crime of which they are innocent, because of some mere suspicion.

I remembered my conversation with Hubert Hand in the hall that morning. What was it that he had thought I had overheard in the cabin and had bribed me not to tell? It was reasonable enough to suppose that, at that time, he had hoped to keep his entire story, his prison records, his reason for coming to the Desert Moon, his relations with Mrs. Ricker and Martha, a secret; just as I had hoped to keep the fact of finding Sam's pipe ashes a secret.

Sam's pipe ashes, again. If someone had put them there, in an effort to implicate Sam, it would have had to be someone who knew Sam's ways. My thoughts were off again. You can't, I told myself, get shed of a following shadow by running away from it. You have to turn and face it, before you can go the other way. I faced it.

John. He had left the ranch at two o'clock. He could easily have gotten back by four, or shortly after. Suppose that he had left the machine down the road, quite far down the road in the spot where the tire tracks showed that the machine had been stopped and started again, the spot where we thought he had changed a tire? He could have climbed the fence, taken a short cut to the house, and gotten here in half or three quarters of an hour. He could have met Gaby; could have stolen into the house with her. He could have killed her, and stolen out of the house again. A short-cut across the fields, and a drive to the house would get him here by six o'clock, the time he did get here. If he could be wicked enough to murder, he could be wicked enough to arrange clues to throw suspicions on his father and his sister. If he were low enough to do that, he would be low enough to rob her of a little money. In other words, grant that John is a blond, and you can go along and grant that he has blue eyes and tow hair. It was all of it false, I told myself, from its wicked beginning to its wicked end; false and unfair. But I had faced it. Now I could turn and go in another direction.

I had not realized how deeply I had been thinking, dawdling over my work in consequence, until I saw that Miss MacDonald had taken up the pork chops, and had them in the warming-oven, and was making gravy, as smooth and tasty looking pan-gravy as I ever saw.

"Good lands!" I said. "I've certainly come to one conclusion."

"It is a little early for conclusions, isn't it?" she asked.

"It is a lot too late for this one."

"Please—" she began; but, for once, I got the best of her.

"My conclusion is," I said, "that, by hook or crook, Sam Stanley has got to get me some efficient help in this house. When I think of what I've put up with, all these years in the way of help, and then see the way you pitch in, it makes me mad all over."

"I wish," she said, "that I might drop this case, right now, and stay here for all time, and be your assistant and a thoroughly domestic person, and forget that there were crimes and criminals in the world."

"Maybe," I said, eagerly, but knowing of course that it was too good to come true, "when you've finished with this case, you could do that. You'd be one of our family, and Sam would pay—well, I guess anything you'd care to ask. He would be as anxious to have you stay as I am."

"No," she smiled, "it is tempting—now. But that desire of mine to give up my profession is a phase that I always pass through at the beginning of each difficult case. In a few days, when I begin to get hold of something, and when things begin to take shape, all my love of the work will return. It is only at first, when I seem to be in a maze of mystery, like this, that I get so discouraged. I always do it, right at first; and I always think that here is the case of which I am going to make an absolute failure."

"Have you ever failed on a case?" I asked.

"Indeed I have, on several. It is queer, though; in each case that has been a failure, it has seemed that the solution was written plainly from the start. It was written all wrong. Judging from that, I should be unusually successful in this present case."

Poor girl, no wonder that she was discouraged. She has given me leave, now that it is all over, to use any of her notes that I care to use in the writing of this story.

"Far be it from Lynn MacDonald," she said, when I asked her about using the notes, "to refuse advertisement of one of her banner cases. My rivals will say that I succeeded in this because, as often happens, my luck stood by me. But you and I, we understand about luck, don't we, Mary?"

"If you aren't afraid," I said, "that your notes may give away some of the secrets of that luck of yours, so that your rivals will be able to lay their hands on some of the same brand?"

She laughed. "I never write down a secret. That is a safe enough rule for an honest person, who plans to remain honest. For a dishonest person, or for one who contemplates any sort of evil, or admits the possibility of such a course, the safe rule would be: 'Never, under any circumstances, put pen or pencil to paper.'"

As Sam would say, "It is a poor rule that won't work both ways."

The notes that Miss MacDonald had made, before this conversation of ours, that day in the kitchen, and on the evening of that same day, July eleventh, are as follows:

CHAPTER XLIV

THE NOTES

"JULY 7. Saw body in crematory late tonight. Cause of death, strangulation. Probably work of expert. Look for Japanese on ranch. Broken fingers on right hand. Beautiful, costly gown, lingerie, etc., indicating wealth and good taste. July 8. Rose, who has shadowed twin sister reports nothing verging on suspicion. Services at crematory. Evidences of genuine grief. Returned to hotel. One telegram sent to Desert Moon Ranch. Received no company. Mailed no letters. Did no shopping.

I received telegram from Desert Moon Ranch engaging me on case. Explicit directions concerning train probably due to inconvenience of meeting trains in rural community, and not due to a desire to have me on the same train with Miss C. However, note.

Telephoned to coroner and undertaker, requesting them to give me conference in Telko. Also, had coroner verify list of names, as published in "Examiner" of all persons present on ranch at time of murder. Note—absence of all ranch employees at the time. Note—extreme reluctance of both coroner and undertaker to give information, or to meet me in Telko.

July 9. Spent day in shadowing Miss C. myself. R's observations, as usual, excellent.

Rose's research through back files of Nevada papers provided following information.

Samuel Stanley, ranch owner. Very wealthy. Exemplary character. High standing throughout state of Nevada. Philanthropic.

John Stanley, foster son of S. Stanley. Distinguished himself on University of Nevada football team, 1916. 1917. Enlisted in air service for war, 1917. Mather's Field when armistice was declared.

Hubert Hand. Winner of chess tournament held in Reno, 1914. 1915.

Mrs. Ollie Ricker. No report.

Chadwick Caufield. No report, except mention as guest at Desert Moon Ranch.

Mary Magin. No report.

Danielle Canneziano. No report, except mention of her arrival with sister, Gabrielle, at ranch last May.

Inspection of Miss C's room in hotel after she had turned in her key revealed no clue. Unusually neat and orderly person. Wastebaskets empty. Newspapers folded on table. Magazine, *Ladies' Home Journal* on table. No heavy perfume. Hotel soap unwrapped. Fastidious. Silver dollar left on table for chambermaid.

Rose reports: Miss C. went from hotel to Ferry Building in taxicab. Crossed alone on ferry. Spoke to no one. Boarded train at eight thirty o'clock and went at once to her berth.

July 10. Afternoon. Breakfasted with Miss C. this morning. No conversation. All the evidences of good breeding.

Had conference with coroner and undertaker. Think that they strongly suspicion John Stanley because of their repeated efforts to keep me from sharing the suspicion.

Information gained from them: Girl murdered on attic stairway. Position of body and marks on throat prove an attack from the rear. Members of the household declare that rigor was complete when body was discovered at eight o'clock the night of the fourth of July. Amateur testimony, however. If a fact, death must have occurred at least three hours before discovery of body.

July 10. Night. Allowed sudden "hunch" to betray reason and common sense. Usual silly mistake at begining of case. Set a trap to catch hawk. Got caught myself. Luckily, no harm done.

Met members of household. First impressions, before hearing history of case other than gained from newspapers, coroner and undertaker.

Danielle Canneziano. Impressions previously noted sustained. Charming, lovable character. Innocent.

Samuel Stanley. Honest. Likable. Kindly. There is a slight chance that he might be involved, unwittingly. He is not stupid; but, decidedly, he is not clever.

Mary Magin. Intelligent. Imaginative. Honest. Innocent.

John Stanley. Too handsome, but unconceited. Bashful. Likable. Judgment suspended.

Hubert Hand. Egotistic. Clever. Judgment suspended.

Ollie Ricker. Life has treated her badly. She has put on armor against it. Stupid. Perhaps sly. Judgment suspended.

Daniel Canneziano. Perfect criminal type. Alibi proves him not guilty of the murder, but he is probably involved. Why did he come here?

July 11. Evening. Heard case history today from Mr. S. and Mrs. M.

Tempted to destroy all first impressions as recorded. Remember, however, the value of mistaken impressions is usually important.

Multiplicity of clues most amazing in my entire experience. Would seem to indicate that many of them are false clues.

MOST IMPORTANT CLUES. (Definite.)

1. John's unnecessary errand.
   A. Length of time gone.
2. Victim's evident fear as she walked through room.
   A. Unusual costume for short walk on the place.
3. Miss C's calling after her sister.
4. C. Caufield's suicide and confessional note. (Probably most important of all clues.)
5. Victim's note to Danielle Canneziano.
   A. Proof of her fear.
6. Death of Martha Stanley.
   A. Missing box containing sleeping powders.
7. Canneziano's presence on the ranch.

CLUES OF LESS IMPORTANCE. (Definite.)

1. Contents of Beaded Bag.
   A. Empty purse.
   B. Missing bill-fold.
   C. Crumpled handkerchief.
   D. Broken cigaret holder.
   E. Note from Hubert Hand.
   F. Cigaret case with two cigarets. Missing.
   H. Empty matchbox.
2. Code Letter.
   A. Destroyed caps for typewriter.
3. Pipe ashes on bag and carpet.
   A. Not necessarily Mr. Stanley's.
   B. Probably fixed false clue.
4. Tatting shuttle. (Doubtful.)

CLUES OF MOST IMPORTANCE. (Indefinite.)

1. Entire story concerning the money from robbery being hidden on Desert Moon Ranch.
2. Victim's peculiar actions after receiving code letter.
   A. Quarrel with Mr. Stanley.
3. Mrs. Ricker's story.
   A. Her reason for telling it.
   B. Did she believe it?
4. Mrs. Magin's desire to remove pipe ashes.
5. Miss C's reluctance to tell of them. Her final complete confession of her suspicions concerning Mr. Stanley.
6. Hubert Hand's unnecessary confession concerning his past life.

CLUES OF LESS IMPORTANCE. (Indefinite.)

1. C. Caufield's powers of ventriloquism.
   A. Probably greatly overrated by members of household.
2. Playing of radio between two and four o'clock that afternoon.
3. Martha's reference to a surprize in which she and Chadwick Caufield were involved.
   A. Possibly untrue.
4. Mrs. Magin's evident antagonism toward the victim.
5. Mr. Stanley's prompt action in locking the attic door and his refusal to have the body touched until the arrival of coroner.
6. Reason for victim's having given gold bracelet to Martha Stanley at that time?

NEGATIVES.

1. No clues of any sort discoverable in victim's room.
2. No clues of any sort discoverable in attic.
3. Lack of motives for crime by persons at present instinctively suspicioned.
4. No dogs on a ranch of this size."

Now, as I read over these notes, my good opinion of myself rises until it runs over the pan. I declare to goodness, the list of clues made out by Lynn MacDonald, crime analyst, is not much better than the list made out by Mary Magin, cook and housekeeper. She has done hers in better form, and she has included a few things that I left out. But, most of the included things were unknown to me at the time I made my list.

CHAPTER XLV

ANOTHER KEY

AS INDICATED by her notes for July eleventh, on that afternoon Miss MacDonald had cleaned the attic, thoroughly, and had found nothing to pay her for her trouble. Keeping me in the dark, as she had, I supposed, when she said early the next morning that she wanted to clean the living-room, that she had got at least a hatful of clues from the attic.

Land knows, the way I had been neglecting things, the living-room was badly in need of a good cleaning. I wanted her to allow me to help her, but she would not. It was luck that I happened to come in with the floor wax just as she was looking at something that she had dug out of the ashes in the fireplace.

"What's that?" I questioned.

"I believe," she answered, "that it is the missing key to the attic door."

She got up, shook out her skirts and went straight upstairs. I trailed along. I stood by and watched her while she fitted the blackened key into the lock. It turned both ways, as smoothly as you please.

Without bothering to say anything to me, she went up and down the hall, trying the key in the locks of the other doors. It fitted none of them. She went downstairs again, with me trailing after her, and tried the key in all the locks downstairs. It fitted none of them, either.

"Do you know," she asked, showing at last that she was conscious of my presence, which I was begining to doubt, "when you last had a fire in that fireplace?"

I thought a minute, and then told her on the night of the fourth of July, during the storm.

"Do you remember who kindled the fire?"

"It had been fixed there, ready for the match, for weeks. Things have gone to rack and ruin here lately; but I used to always see to it that the fire was set in the fireplace, ready to light when needed."

"Do you happen to know who applied the match to the fire that night?"

"Sam did."

"But surely, even though the rain had come up, a fire on the fourth of July could not be necessary?"

"We don't have fires here when they are necessary," I told her. "We have them when they are possible without absolute suffocation. Half a pint of rain is plenty of excuse for Sam to light a fire at any time, even if he has to open all the doors and the windows to cool off."

What I was saying was the honest truth; but I had a mean feeling that she didn't believe me.

Right here, with apologies to Miss MacDonald and others of her profession, I want to say that if they would just remember that nine times out of ten a person who pretends to be telling the truth is telling it, it would save them a lot of mistakes, and a lot of worry. The man who spends his time biting his money to see whether or not it is genuine doesn't, usually, have much of it to bite; to say nothing of the wear and tear on his own teeth, which would be considerable.

I was standing by the living-room windows, trying to keep my temper down with some such consoling thoughts as these, when I saw a car drive up and the coroner and the undertaker getting out of it.

I told Miss MacDonald the news, and asked her what in the world she supposed they were coming here for, at this time in the morning.

"I needed to see them again," she answered. "Mr. Stanley telephoned to them last evening."

"Well," I said, "that means that I've got about half an hour to disguise a family meal as a company dinner—"

"Don't bother," she interrupted. "They won't be here for luncheon—dinner. I need to see them only about ten minutes."

I didn't bother answering that. If she didn't know any more about the ways of people in this country than that, I didn't see why I should take it on myself to teach her.

But she was right. She talked to them a few minutes, and, though I insisted that they stay for dinner, off they went. It was an insult to the Desert Moon Ranch. Everyone on the place, but Miss MacDonald, knew it. Two weeks before, if a couple of friends had left the ranch at eleven-thirty in the morning, with no reasonable excuse for so doing, Sam would have blown up and burst with rage. That noon he was not even decently indignantly interested.

He had plenty of interest, though, concerning the finding of the attic key. He had had it all settled, and was satisfied that, since it had been proven that Gaby had been killed on the stairway, it had also been proven that no member of the household could have been implicated. Now this second key coming to light, the key that must have been put over back of the wood before the fire was lighted that night, and that must have been blackened in that one fire, because there had been no fire in that fireplace since, dragged, to quote Sam, not wishing to use such words on my own hook, "Every damn one of us back into the damn mess again."

"Sam," I said, and I guess my only excuse is that I was still angry at having my honest word doubted, "do you know what I think? I think that Miss MacDonald—though land knows she is a nice girl, and a living wonder as help in the kitchen and around the house—is going to be a flat fizzle from start to finish when it comes to discovering the murderer."

"That's kind of the way I got it sized up, too," Sam said. "But if she's good help to you, she's worth a lot more than her expenses."

"It isn't the cost of her," I said. "I'm afraid she is going to do a lot of harm around here."

"Goodnight, Mary!" he said. "If anyone can do any more harm around here than has been done already—why, leave 'em do it."

"Not much with your 'leave 'em do its'" I said. "My idea is that we've had about enough trouble. What I'm getting at is this, Sam: I think that fool girl, at present, is suspicioning you more than any other one of us."

"That's the way I had that sized up, too," he said. "But let her go ahead. If she can prove I'm guilty, I'm willing to hang for it."

"Don't be a fool, Sam," I snapped. "Did you ever happen to hear of circumstantial evidence?"

"You bet. But they can't hang more than one innocent person on circumstantial evidence, and there's enough of that stuff around here now to hang about five or six of us. I'll take my chances with the rest of you, Mary."

"Lands, Sam," I was taken aback, "do you think she suspects me?"

Something pretty close to the old twinkle came into Sam's eyes. "Well, Mary, Gaby was one extra to do for, and she came late to meals and pestered you quite a lot. Furthermore, though it hasn't been made a point of, you were all alone in the kitchen for the hour between five and six o'clock. You might have slipped up and have done the deed between the time you put the meat on and took the biscuits out."

I knew that he thought he was being funny; but I didn't like it. "See here, Sam," I began, "Danny was going back and forth all the time—"

"Now then:" Sam interrupted, mocking Miss MacDonald. "Did Miss Canneziano have any particular reason for watching you. No. I see. Then, I am afraid, she can not be positive that you were not out of the kitchen. Twenty minutes often seem like two hours and sixteen minutes—

"I'll tell you what, Mary," Sam got suddenly serious. "I'm going to wait a few more days, and then if this lady isn't progressing a deal faster than she is at present, I'm going to pay her off, full amount, of course, and wire to Frisco for a plain, ordinary, he-man detective to come up here and take hold of things. By the way," he went on, "does it seem to you that Danny and Canneziano are getting along all right?"

"I judge it isn't a case of their getting along, much," I said. "So far as I know, she hasn't spoken a word to him since she greeted him the evening she came home."

"Well," he hesitated, "well—I know a mite further than that. I'll tell you, sometime that isn't dinner time—maybe."

He went into the dining-room, and I followed him.

All during that dinner, and the same had been true of every meal since the first breakfast I've mentioned, John hardly took his eyes off of Miss MacDonald. I made a way to speak to him about it, alone, right after dinner.

"John," I said, "for mercy's sakes, what do you want to sit and stare at Miss MacDonald for, during meals, like she was the place where you had lost something?"

He blushed. "Gosh, Mary! I haven't been doing that, have I?"

"You certainly have. It doesn't look nice, John. Why do you do it?"

"I didn't know that I did. But, on the square, did you ever see anything as pretty—I mean, as clean and—well, kind of comforting looking? She changes so, too; like a diamond, or a desert, or a sunrise, or something. Did you ever see anyone as interesting to look at, Mary?"

"Never mind asking me," I said. "Just you go and ask Danny some of those questions."

"Danny," he answered, "is—well, Danny is Danny, of course. She's different."

"Better take to watching how different she is," I advised, and left him to think it over, and went into the living-room.

Canneziano was loafing around in there. "Mary," he said, "I'll make a dicker with you."

CHAPTER XLVI

A DICKER

"NOT with me," I said, and started up the stairs.

Curiosity like mine is a curse. I'd gone about four steps up when it caught me. "What's your old dicker?" I said.

"If you'll persuade Sam to give me the ten thousand for producing the murderer, I'll split it with you."

I am tired of apologizing for myself. I will state, merely, that I managed to say the one thing, under those circumstances, that I should not have said. "Do you know who the murderer is?" Thereby proving that I was possessed of about as much diplomacy as an alarm clock.

"Certainly not," he answered. He had not hesitated; he had looked straight into my eyes. But I knew that he believed that he had lied.

"See here," I said. "I take it that one five thousand dollars is as good to you as another. If you know who committed the murder, and will produce him, I'll give you the five thousand dollars myself."

"Don't say that, Mary," Danny stepped out from behind the long curtains at the end of the south windows.

Canneziano jumped like a spurred bronco. "Spying, eh, my lady?"

She spoke directly to me. "Listen, Mary: don't ever, for any reason, enter into any sort of an agreement with this man. If he knows, or thinks that he knows, who the murderer is, he can be forced to tell without a bribe. If he had known for one day, one hour, and had withheld the information, he is, in effect, an accomplice—there is a legal term for it, but I have forgotten it. I am going out, now, to find Uncle Sam, and to bring him here and tell him that this man says that he knows who committed the murder. Mary, you telephone to the sheriff in Telko—"

"Just a moment, please," Canneziano spoke smoothly and smilingly. "I have said, definitely, that I do not know who killed Gaby. And I do not know. I am bored, unspeakably bored. I should like to try my hand at detecting this—er, villain. But," he shrugged his narrow shoulders, "with no impetus—"

"The fact that she was your own daughter—" I began, hotly.

"Don't Mary," Danny interrupted, with a sigh. "There is no use. You and he do not speak the same language."

"How is this?" Canneziano said, and went on speaking, very rapidly, in some foreign language.

Danny stood and stared at him without a mite of expression on her face. He paused for breath. She said, "I have forgotten my Italian. I do not know what you said, and I am glad that I do not know. Come, Mary, shall we go upstairs?"

In the upper hall she said that she wanted me to go with her to Miss MacDonald, because she wanted to tell Miss MacDonald what had just happened.

We knocked on her door. She greeted us pleasantly enough, but there was a pucker between her eyebrows.

"You have asked us," Danny began at once, "to tell you nothing about the case. Does that mean that you do not wish to have us tell you of day by day developments, which seem to have a direct bearing on the case?"

"As, for instance?" Miss MacDonald questioned.

Danny told her about what had happened, from the time she had stepped behind the curtains, until she and I had come upstairs together.

Miss MacDonald's first question was, "Why were you watching him?"

"Because," Danny answered, straight, "I think he came here with some evil purpose. I should like to find out what that purpose is."

"Why were you so eager to prevent Mrs. Magin's making a pact with him?"

"Miss MacDonald, a woman who has dealt with criminals, as you must have, should not need to ask that question."

"But," Miss MacDonald persisted, "you have not dealt with criminals."

"I have dealt with this man. I know that he is bad and crafty. For five thousand dollars he would perjure himself over and over again. He would produce witnesses who would perjure themselves. You know the ways of criminals better than I do, Miss MacDonald. They are treacherous."

"Has this man approached you with similar offers, Miss Canneziano?"

"He has had no opportunity."

"You are sure of that?"

Danny's chin went up a trifle. "I don't understand."

"I think that you do."

Danny turned to me. "Mary," she said, "yesterday afternoon that man came to my room when I was alone. He slipped in, closed my door, and locked it. I ran into Gaby's room, but I could not get out of it because the doors were all locked. I went into Gaby's bathroom and locked myself in. I stayed there for half an hour, or longer, until he left. Miss MacDonald evidently thinks that he and I were in conversation during that time. I have no proof that we weren't. Do you believe me, Mary?"

"I do, with all my heart," I said.

Miss MacDonald persisted. "You told no one about this?"

"I did not dare to tell. If John thought that that man—" She stopped short.

"Yes?" questioned Miss MacDonald.

"I mean that John would fight with him; would whip him within an inch of his life."

"Why should you care?"

Danny looked at me.

"She'd care," I said, answering the appeal in her big, hurt eyes, "because she is a woman, Miss MacDonald. It may be hard for you to understand; but women, who aren't crime analysts, don't want their men fighting."

"Thank you, Mary," Danny said, and walked hurriedly out of the room.

CHAPTER XLVII

AN AID

"MRS. MAGIN," Miss MacDonald began, right off, the minute the door had closed behind Danny, "I want to ask you to help me with this case."

"I couldn't be any help to you," I said. I guess I was rather tart about it.

"Why not?"

"One reason is," I said, "that anybody who doesn't know any better than to suspicion Danny, in this affair, would need a lot more help, to get anywhere, than I could give them."

"My only suspicion concerning Miss Canneziano," she answered, "is that she knows more than she is willing to tell. I may be wrong about that. Have you any other reason for refusing to help me?"

"Only that you don't believe a word I say. If you would consider that I am, anyway, trying to be honest, and if you'd do the same with the others, until you are sure that you have reason to do otherwise, I'd consider it an honor to help you, and I'd thank you kindly."

"I am afraid that I don't entirely understand."

"Crime and wickedness," I told her, "aren't the general rules of the world. If they were, all the good people would have to be locked up, for safety's sake, while the criminals ran loose for lack of space to confine them. Why, instead of doubting my simple word, this morning, when I told you how Sam always lighted a fire, for any excuse, couldn't you have believed I was telling the truth, and that whoever put the key in there knew that Sam would light the fire, and so throw suspicion on himself?"

"That is possible," she admitted. "But the key, there, leads me to suppose that whoever put it there, to hide it, would be too stupid for much subtle reasoning. Keys, you know, don't burn."

"They don't," I agreed. "But we never take the ashes out of the fireplace as you did this morning. We open the ash-dump and shoot them down into a barrel in the basement. Every few months the ashes are emptied in Starvation Field, eight miles or more away from here. Not a bad way to get the key carried off the place, if that was what he wanted. Not a bad way, either, to throw more suspicion on Sam, if the key was found."

"Most criminals are stupid, though," she clung to her point. "Try as they may, they always make some stupid blunder."

"It seems to me," I said, "that the ones who get caught are stupid; they are the ones who have made the blunder, left the clue. But look at the number of criminals who get clean way. Not long ago, I was reading some statistics—"

"You know what Mark Twain said about statistics? 'There are three kinds of liars: liars, damned liars, and statistics.'"

I had to laugh. I think she said that to put me in a good humor, for she went right on to say, "But you haven't told me, yet, that you will be my assistant in this case."

She couldn't hoodwink me. "I told you that I'd be no use to you, as long as you doubted every word I said."

"But," she argued, "by your own admission you tried to shield Mr. Stanley, immediately after the murder—stopping to clean away his—the pipe ashes. If you tried, once, to shield him, wouldn't you try again to shield him, if you needed to?"

"No," I said, "I wouldn't. I'll tell you why. That night, and for several days after, my mind was like a dirty cluttered kitchen. I couldn't get enough space cleared in it to start thinking, let alone working at it. I have tidied up a place, since then, and I've done a batch of thinking. I know, now, that Sam doesn't need me, nor anyone, to shield him. Any evidence found against him will be good evidence, in the end, against whoever fixed it to throw blame on him."

"I am inclined to agree with you," she said. "Now then. Is there anyone here who would benefit by his conviction?"

"Am I," I questioned, "your assistant, or am I not?"

"Does it make a difference in your answer?" she questioned in return.

"A deal of difference. Being your assistant, honor would bind me, wouldn't it? If I know that you are believing that I'll help, and tell the truth, I'll try to. If I think I am to be doubted, anyway, maybe I'll say what I'd like to say."

She sat and looked straight at me for at least half a minute. "I do believe you," she said, "and trust you. I have, since I first met you at the station. I can't help myself. You're all right, Mrs. Magin, and I know it. I'll agree to your terms. Now then: As my assistant, is there anyone on the place who would benefit in any way by Mr. Stanley's conviction?"

"In a way," I said, though it all but choked me, "John would. He is to inherit everything Sam has. But John loves Sam. And John didn't do it."

"Miss Canneziano would also benefit, then, wouldn't she, since she is to marry young Mr. Stanley?"

"It doesn't make sense," I said. "John has plenty of his own, right now; and Sam would give them anything and everything they wanted besides, as long as he lived."

"I had understood," she said, "that Mr. Stanley objected to the marriage."

"Not a bit of it. He has asked them to wait a year. That's all."

"Is there," she asked, next, "any person at present on the ranch whom you would concede might, possibly, commit a murder?"

"Canneziano."

"Yes, I know. And leaving him out of it?"

"Well," I had to hesitate, "I am not sure. Every instinct I have tells me that neither Hubert Hand nor Mrs. Ricker. No. It is an awful thing to say; but, do you know, Gabrielle Canneziano herself is the only other person who has ever been on this ranch whom I could even imagine doing such a terrible thing."

"I wonder why you disliked her so much?" she said.

"Because she didn't have any of the decent, ordinary virtues," I answered. "She didn't know anything about them. Not charity, nor gratitude, nor kindness, nor honesty, nor modesty, nor—nor anything."

"Isn't it strange that twin sisters, who looked as much alike as these girls did, should be so entirely different as to character?"

I had not seen her notes at that time. I did not know that she had written "Innocent" after Danny's name. I spoke up, pretty hotly.

"Strange or not, it is true. In character those two girls were as different as night and day. I never even thought that they looked alike. Who told you that they did?"

"I have seen their photographs," she reminded me. "Chadwick Caufield's album is filled with them."

"Their photographs may look alike. They didn't."

"But they *did*," she insisted.

"I tell you," I said, "that they acted so differently, and talked so differently, and dressed so differently, that there was not one bit of likeness."

"A most unusual state of affairs for duplicate twins. These sunshine and tempest relationships are seldom found, outside a Mary J. Holmes novel. Miss Danielle Canneziano came here on a most doubtful errand—an errand that amounted to robbery, nothing else—"

"If you are accusing Danny—" I interrupted.

"Oh, I am not!" There was a flash of temper in that. "Making all allowances for mistakes in time, Miss Canneziano could not have committed the murder herself. But, suppose that her past was not as innocent and blameless as she would like to have you all think. Suppose that a revelation of all she knows, or suspects, concerning her sister's death, would also bring to light things that she cannot afford to have brought to light concerning herself. It is at least reasonable to think that she knows more than she is willing to tell."

"Maybe," I had to admit. "But I doubt it."

"Why do you so dislike that admission?"

"Because John loves her. John is a good boy. I'd hate to see his heart broken."

"Will you forgive me for saying that young Mr. Stanley does not impress me as a man who is very deeply in love?"

"I know," I agreed. "Just now he is a mite put out with Danny. He has been, ever since she accused Sam."

"Considering the circumstances under which Miss Canneziano made that accusation, young Mr. Stanley is acting most unjustly—if that is the case."

"All men are unjust to the women they love," I told her. "It seems to be a part of it, like a rash with measles."

She smiled at that, and changed the subject.

"I wonder whether you noticed," she said, "that coming up from the station I set a trap for Miss Canneziano. Just for an instant, I fancied that there was more fear than grief in her attitude toward meeting her father. I suggested, you remember, that she see him alone? I wanted to see whether she desired a private interview with him. Her prompt refusal made it evident that she had no secret to give to him, and expected to get none from him. That is in her favor. Before you go now, since you have agreed to help me, do you mind if I direct a bit? I want you to keep one eye on Miss Canneziano. I want you to keep the other eye on Mr. Canneziano, Mr. Hand, and Mrs. Ricker. Will you do that?"

"One whole eye for Danny," I questioned, "and only a third of an eye for each of the others?"

"For the present," she smiled. "Will you do that?"

I said that I would. It was not until after dinner the next day, when I was resting in my own room, feeling as virtuous as the three monkeys, who see no, hear no, speak no evil, pleased as Punch over my failures of the past twenty-four hours, that I realized that I just naturally could not carry through a job that went as much against the grain as that job went.

We are, I thought, allowed to know some things—just simple, honest knowing. And I knew that keeping a suspicious eye on the girl who had said "bless your heart" to me, on the evening of the second of July, was as sensible as sitting up for Santa Claus.

Someone knocked on my door. I answered the knock. Miss MacDonald, all smiles, was standing there.

"Let me come in," she said; and, as soon as my door was closed behind her, "A most fortunate thing has happened."

CHAPTER XLVIII

NEW CLUES

"SOMEONE," she went on, "has been to my desk and has stolen the code letter."

I could manage nothing but an echo. "Fortunate!" I said.

"I had a careful copy of it, locked up, of course. I have been leaving the letter in plain sight on my desk for bait. Don't you see, Mary," she forgot her formality in her excitement, "this is the mistake I have been hoping for. I have found a beginning at last. It is bound to be easy from now on."

She was almost doing dance steps. I wasn't. I was thinking, hard, in the tidy space in my mind; trying not to get it cluttered with her excitement, trying to cook up some common sense.

"The letter," she went on, "could not have concerned anyone in this house except Miss Canneziano, her father, and, possibly, not probably, young Mr. Stanley."

"I guess," I said, "that was likely what you were wanted to think by the thief."

Her gray eyes questioned me.

"Supposing," I answered, "that Mrs. Ricker, or Hubert Hand, or any one of us, wanted to get you clear off the track, suspecting especially Danny, could one of us do better than to steal the code letter?"

"My word!" she said. "And you, with a mind that works like that, spending your life doing cooking."

"Doing cooking," I told her, "is how my mind comes to work like that. If anyone ever told you that it didn't take brains to cook, he was making a big mistake."

"But such quick, sure thinking," she said, "is marvelous."

She laughed. "Listen to me doing a Dr. Watson to your Holmes," she said. "Golly, but I'm lucky to have you at hand, though."

I love to be flattered. I sat and preened myself.

"All the same," she went on, "it does prove one thing. That the murderer, or his close accomplice, is right here on the place, now."

"Chad's confession proved that. The key in the fireplace proved it, too."

"Dear me, no. Not conclusively. Now, let me see." She took a folded paper from the front of her dress. "Here is my copy of the letter. It does look a mess, eh?"

I looked at the paper and read, as before:

"Paexzazlytp! f-y nyx ogrgrago, rn fgao atf jan j-asn, ahzgo zkg c-. ahhalo, vkgt nyx clplzgf rg zkg kypulzae, zkaz nyx palf . . ."

It surely looked a mess.

"The fact that it was written on the typewriter," she said, "makes me suspect that the typewriter may unwrite it for us."

I told her then what I had not thought to tell her before; about my having heard the typewriter going, slowly, in Gaby's room right after she had received the letter.

"Fine!" she said. "She had burned the caps for the keys, too—all but the curly 'Q' that rolled away. May I use the same typewriter that she used?"

We went together into Gaby's room.

"I should have thought you'd want to clean this room, first of all," I said.

"Mr. Stanley unlocked it for me that first night. I spent five or six very busy hours in here, and I slept here that night, too."

"Upon my soul! Doesn't that go to show? I'd have taken oath in any court that you spent the night in your own room."

"That is exactly it," she said. "Honest people are so sure that they know things which they don't know at all, and that they have seen things which they haven't seen."

I have wished, since, that I had said something else instead of saying, "Well, I might think I knew something which I didn't know; but I'd never make a mistake about what I had seen or had not seen."

"Perhaps not—" she said.

"Did you find anything in here that night?" I questioned.

"Nothing. The burned papers were completely burned, as they usually are. Of course, the complete absence of clues should be made into a valuable clue, but I haven't quite worked it out. For instance, though, you insist that she was a vain, conceited person?"

"If ever there was one."

"Vain women usually have photographs of themselves about. I found none here."

"She used to have one, in a silver frame," I said. I looked around and saw the frame lying face down on the mantel. I picked it up. An old faded picture of Sam and Margarita in their wedding togs confronted me. I had seen it plenty of times before, but in the old album downstairs.

When I had shown it to Miss MacDonald, and had told her about it, she took it and carried it to the window.

"The glass has been washed, carefully," she said, "since the picture was put in here."

She pressed on the purple velvet back and took the picture from the frame. Across the bottom of the picture, where the wide silver frame had hidden it, written in Gaby's bold handwriting, were these words: "My one deadly enemy."

"My word!" said Miss MacDonald.

"Are you certain," she questioned, next, "that the girl's mother is not living?"

"Don't ask me to be certain of anything," I said, and looked for a chair to sit down in.

She came and put one of her capable hands on my shoulders. "You shouldn't let this trouble you," she said. "It is more than likely that Gabrielle Canneziano had nothing to do with it. I must verify the handwriting."

In the next instant she certainly gave me a fine turn. Her eyes went big and round, her cheeks blazed with blushes, and she clapped her hands to them and stood staring at me as if I were the original human horror. "I—" she gasped out, "I—have made a mistake."

I felt like rising and giving her a good shaking. "Lands!" I snapped. "Who hasn't?"

"I would discharge one of my assistants like that," she snapped her fingers, "for such a mistake. Crime analyst! Confounded ass! Conceited amateur! Oh!" She went running out of the room, leaving me sitting there to do what I liked with that talk of hers.

She was back in two minutes. She had Gaby's last note to Danny in her hands. "I have been assuming," she said, and her cheeks flamed up again, "that Gabrielle Canneziano wrote this note. I have had a pleasant little assumption. Now I will get some facts. I must find a sample of her handwriting—"

She began to search through Gaby's desk. I helped her. Gaby had made a thorough job of her burning. There was not a scratch of her writing to be found.

"Danny will have something," I said. "I'll see whether she is in her room."

Danny was in her room, sitting at her own desk, writing out checks and addressing envelopes. I told her I had come to get a sample of Gaby's handwriting.

"I am sorry, Mary," she said, as she finished addressing an envelope, sealed it, and looked for a stamp in the stamp-box, "but I haven't anything, except, of course, the last note she wrote to me, and Miss MacDonald is keeping that."

"Please, dear," I urged, "won't you search through your desk, and your papers? It is really very important."

"But I have looked, Mary. Mrs. Ricker had the same idea, yesterday. She thought that Gaby might not have written that last note. I am certain that she did; but I searched and searched to satisfy Mrs. Ricker. I destroyed Gaby's letters to me, when we came to the United States. She has had no reason for writing anything to me since then. Hubert Hand had several notes from her; but he says he has not kept them."

She addressed another envelope, and added it to the pile beside her. "It isn't," she said, noticing my reluctance to leave, "that I am not interested, Mary. It is only that I know that I haven't a scrap of her writing."

I turned to go. I had reached the door when she called to me and asked me to take her letters downstairs for the mailbag, when I went downstairs.

I returned to Miss MacDonald with my information.

"Dear me!" she said. "Mrs. Ricker indeed? If only they would work with me, Mary, instead of by themselves, or—against me. At any rate," she put aside the photograph, a rulerlike thing, and her magnifying glass, "the note to Danielle Canneziano, and the writing on the photograph were done by the same person. What are the letters you have there, in your hand, Mrs. Magin?"

I told her they were some that Danny had asked me to take downstairs. She held out her hand for them. I had to allow her to have them. But first I read the addresses. They were the names of mail-order stores in Portland and San Francisco.

Miss MacDonald looked at them closely. Then she took up a flat paper knife, from Gaby's desk, and deliberately opened the envelope by lifting the flap.

"She surely does not seal her letters carefully," she said, and took out a check, nothing else, from the envelope.

"It is dated today, the thirteenth of July," she said.

"Of course it is," I answered, tartly, not liking any of this. "She was writing them just now, while I was in there."

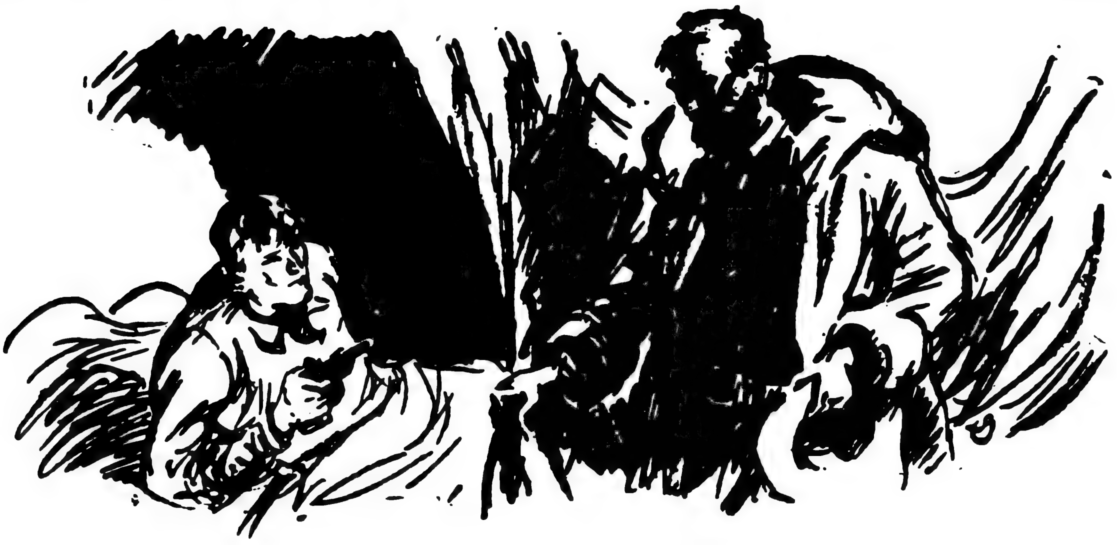
"Did you see her writing them?"

"I certainly did."

She sighed and moved her head with an impatient gesture, rather like John's worried gestures. "Then that is that," she said, and returned the check to the envelope, sealed the envelope, and gave it, with the others, back to me.

"Now for the code letter," she said, and sat down in front of the typewriter. I left her there, and went to look for Sam.

In the following, and concluding, installment, the cloud of mystery lifts from the fated Desert Moon Ranch. The complicated clues fix the guilt for those two murders. Yet who could have perpetrated them? And how?



OUT *of the* HILLS

A Western Story of the Land Beyond the Law

By

WILLIAM CORCORAN

WINTER came early to the high country this year. The birds were gone, the beef stuff had drifted down the passes, the beaver in Crazy Man Creek stored in their pond a great mass of logs and branches whose tender bark would nourish them long beneath the ice, and the mighty hills lay silent and empty awaiting the snows. Only the hardy or inexperienced remained—or those who dared not go down to the haunts of men.

The little cabin in Juniper Basin had not yet been abandoned. In the open doorway, despite the late afternoon cold in the thin air, a man stood bareheaded. He was young, earnest of face, and strong of body. He stared across the flat meadow land of the basin, curious and puzzled. The pale rays of the sun were almost directly in his eyes at this hour, and the moving object on the flat was not clearly distinguishable.

He spoke, calling into the cabin, "Oh, Kate. Come here."

A woman appeared behind him, a trace of anxious wonder on her face, for his words had held that peculiar preoccupied tone of one who is uneasy. The woman stared over his shoulder to where he pointed out the distant object that held his attention.

"It's a horse," she said after a moment. She, too, was young, yet she was thin and there was a look of weariness about her eyes. Her hand gripped the man's arm.

"A horse and rider," he amended.

They watched together for a time, while the mounted man approached slowly and erratically across the flat. Something about the newcomer increased their uneasiness, drew them closer together. Then the woman gave a start and exclaimed, "Why, Jim, he's hurt!"

"By George, he is," the man affirmed. Immediately he broke from the doorway of the cabin and made for the little stable at a run. He was out again in a moment, leading a saddled and bridled horse. He threw himself on the mount and sent him racing straight for the mysterious rider.

The stranger, when he came up to the cabin, supported by the homesteader while the horses walked side by side, proved to be a tall, lean man in the late thirties, and though his face was tanned by the sun and creased by the wind, a deadly pallor was on it now. His eyes were glassy and the wiry jaw was tense with knotted muscles.

Between them the man and the woman drew the stranger from the saddle. He stood awkwardly with their aid, breathing harshly through pinched nostrils. They guided him into the cabin, and lowered him to the bunk at one end of the room. As they lifted his feet on the blankets he abruptly went limp in their hands. He lay there, relaxed and mercifully unconscious.

All that night they labored, while the glassy look remained in the stranger's eyes and the breath came hoarsely from his throat. And he lived. The full extent of the wound they could not guess. It was plainly a bullet wound, and must have been made by a heavy missile, which seemed to have passed clean through. Twice young Jim tried to probe the wound, but the rude instrument he used, a heavy jack-knife blade, was unequal to the job. So was Jim. After the second attempt he was completely unnerved.

Toward dawn the slight internal bleeding apparently stopped, and the heart beat more firmly. The woman left her vigil to fill a coffeepot and put it on the stove. The early, thin sun slanted through the tiny window as the two sat with steaming cups of coffee, talking in low voices.

"He'll live now," the woman said. "He's badly hurt, but all he needs is careful nursing to pull out safe."

The man frowned. "That means days and weeks yet."

"It does," she assured him.

"But it's getting set to snow. We can't stay here."

"We've stayed this long," she said wistfully, and she glanced through the little window at the reluctant, wintry dawn.

THE man rose and walked to the window, where he stood silently looking out. After a moment the woman followed and put her hands on his shoulders. "There's something on your mind, Jim. What is it?"

He looked at her. "You know," he said. "This fellow—who is he? He's a hard man, or he wouldn't have lived through the night. I looked at his gun. Every shell has been fired. It has a filed sear; it's a man-killing weapon."

"But we never need be afraid after what we've done for him tonight."

"It's not him," the man persisted. "It's whoever shot him." He turned and held her in his strong young arms. "Kate, I'm not afraid for myself. It's—oh, sometimes I hate myself for taking you into this terrible country."

"No, Jim, no," she protested, soothing him. "We love this country, you and I."

"God knows I did—once," he said. "But it's not the country, Kate honey; it's the kind of men that are here. There's no use fooling ourselves. There are no women up in these hills; and the men—Lord knows how they live. Not by working, anyway. I haven't wanted to talk about it, but I know now that they have driven settlers out before. They've left me alone so far, I figure, because in some way they expect to use me. It may even be," and his eyes narrowed, "that you are the reason."

Dread touched her face, but only for a moment, and she smiled bravely again. "Nobody has harmed us. They can only be grateful after—this."

"Maybe. But for my part, I almost wish he—"

"Jim!" she exclaimed, horrified. "No! No matter how bad he may be he was a dying man who came to us for help."

"And if a posse happens along and finds him here, we may be looking for help." Jim yanked his sheepskin coat from a peg and left the cabin. The ground was hard as rock under his feet as he went to the stable to feed the horses. Winter was gathering its strength.

For three days the stranger lay in a fever that verged at times on delirium. For three days after that he lay in restful sleep. Not once in all this time did he display any sign of curiosity regarding his surroundings or the couple who ministered to him. As coherent thought returned he thanked the woman each time she aided him, but closed his eyes and slept when it would seem that she invited him to speak.

Then one morning she became aware that his eyes followed her as she moved about the little cabin at her work. The glassy look was gone completely, and his eyes were blue, a clear, hard blue.

She smiled and drew near. "Feel better this morning?" she asked. In her voice was sympathy and reassurance.

Unblinkingly he watched her for a moment. "Tenderfoot?" he remarked.

She essayed another smile, a bit rueful

this time. "I guess I am," she agreed. "We both are, my husband and I. We homesteaded here in Juniper Basin last year, but we haven't accomplished much."

"Juniper Basin," he repeated. He looked through the window in the front of the cabin at the leaden sky. "How long have I been here?"

She told him. He asked further questions, casual questions, but such as a man might ask who wished his presence in the country to remain unknown. He seemed satisfied to learn that no visitors had come to the cabin during the week. Then he studied the woman a moment, and asked, "Where's my gun?"

"It's here." The woman procured it from the belt hanging on the wall. "Jim cleaned it for you," she added.

He was weak, but he managed to jack open the cylinder with a quick flip. He examined the five cartridges exposed, pulled one out and turned it about in his fingers; then replaced it and closed the gun. He thrust it down in the bunk beside the mattress, near to his hand.

"I'll just keep it here," he remarked. He did not look at her, but closed his eyes, and in a moment it seemed he slept again.

It was after dinner, and Jim stood before the window, smoking his pipe and staring out. There was little work to be done on the homestead now. The last hay had long been stacked, the last furrow of the fall plowing completed, even the milch cow and the few head of other stock had been taken down country two weeks ago. He had spent much time the past few days brooding and watching the dark gray skies for the first snowflake. The woman washed the dishes in the corner with gentle clatter, and the stranger lay motionless, staring through half closed eyes at the ceiling above.

Jim ceased to puff on the pipe and stood for a moment with fixed gaze. He rubbed the glass and peered with absorbed attention down the basin. Then he turned and shot a glance at the stranger. The man had not moved, but his cold blue eyes were watching Jim attentively.

"Somebody's coming up from the creek," Jim said. The woman stood with hand arrested in the act of drying a cup. She set it down and turned to the stranger and her eyes were wide.

The man seemed suddenly to have gathered strength from some untouched reserve. He stared at her. "If you had a sort of curtain, ma'am," he said, "you could hang it in front of me." There was no explanation, no request, only that calm suggestion.

"You won't use that gun?" she pleaded.

"Not unless it's necessary, ma'am. And I'll have to judge of that myself." For the first time a flicker of grim humor touched his thin lips, and he added, "Besides, you don't want all that nursin' thrown away, do you?"

The woman moved swiftly to the curtained shelves in a corner beside the bunk and pulled down a blanket. It was a fancy blanket, bright red with white stripes, and made a vivid splash of color as she flung it out to unfold it. Jim threw open a chest and procured a hammer and some wire nails. He took the blanket without a word and nailed one edge of it to a low log rafter immediately above the bunk. It did not reach the floor, but it shut off the stranger completely as it hung there, barbaric, blood red.

WHEN the newcomer rode up the woman was at the window. Jim had gone outside to meet him, after thrusting a Colt .45 down his waistband. As the man swung from the saddle she recognized him. Several times in the past months, at long separated intervals, he had ridden by. He was a big man with alert dark eyes and a clipped black beard. He had a sort of gusty geniality, but though he talked much he said very little indeed. The woman, without any substantial cause, felt uneasy when he came. She knew him only as Skinner, and gathered that he had a ranch somewhere in the tangle of empty hills to the north of Juniper Basin.

He greeted her today no less heartily than usual as he entered the cabin. "I couldn't miss stoppin' by nohow, ma'am," he assured her. "It ain't easy to be proper neighborly in this country." His eyes flashed once about the cabin, hesitated on the red blanket, and then returned to beam on her. He threw off his hat and sheepskin coat, but made no move to unbuckle the gun belt he wore beneath.

"We don't often have visitors, Mr. Skinner," she said, smiling, "but you're always welcome. I'll get you a bite to eat."

The man sat at the table with the homesteader, and while she put the kettle and a pot of stew back on the stove he talked. He addressed both of them, congratulating them on their progress with the land, and he told the man jovially what good fortune he enjoyed in having so spunky a little partner working with him. When the food was put before him he ate between words, discussing the weather and the vicissitudes of ranching in the mountains.

Later, when he pushed back the empty plate and rolled a cigarette, he related some news. There had been a murder. "You know the feller," he reminded the homesteader. "Ez Gibbons, down on Crazy Man Creek. It happened a week ago. Ez was found all shot up beside his corral. The bars were down and the hosses gone, and it looks like a rustlers' killin'. The feller who did it got away, but from the signs he was hit bad himself, for there was blood around on the ground."

Jim was sitting perfectly still in his chair. "Do they know who he was?" he asked.

"Well—" Skinner said doubtfully, hesitating, "who it is don't matter a lot. He's a killer, and he'll get his needin's in good time." He was facing the homesteader, but now he edged his chair casually about so that it placed him back to the wall. Directly across the room hung the still, red blanket.

"We been lookin' for this feller," went on Skinner, "and we got an idea we're going to get him yet. Nobody can come into this country and pull off killin's and get away free. One reason why I came over this way today was to see would you be willing to join us should we call on you."

"Join you in what?" asked the homesteader.

The other puffed on his cigarette. His air of geniality had somewhat evaporated, and in a subtle fashion he was calculating, alert and hard. "Why, if you was asked to ride, or do anything to help square this killin', for instance, what would you say?"

The homesteader glanced toward his wife. Her eyes, large and scared, held his for a moment, and then dropped again. "Well, I don't know much about Ez Gibbons," he said, "and I don't know anything at all about the killing. I think I'd like to know more, first."

The rancher thought that statement over for a moment. He shot a glance at the homesteader. "You got to take a lot for granted in this country, young feller," he said. "Questions are sometimes welcome and sometimes not. You'd best do what you're told."

Color mounted slowly in the young man's face. "What am I told to do, then? And who's to do the telling?"

The other crushed the cigarette in his plate with a gesture of finality. He rose, and stood with legs apart, hands on hips, while he faced the homesteader. "There's a man at large in these hills who killed one of us," he declared. "He can't escape, 'cause there's someone watching at every trail out." He turned, stared at the woman narrowly, and then eyed the red blanket that hung before the bunk. He took a step toward it.

The woman sat with a hand pressed to her breast in apprehension. The young homesteader drew a foot back, as if to rise, and his hands gripped the edge of the table.

"That's a right pretty blanket hangin' there," the big man observed. He approached closer.

"Skinner!" said the young man. He was on his feet beside the table. His right hand rested at his belt, from which protuded the walnut butt of the Colt .45. It was a gesture of complete casualness, yet one no gunwise man ever made casually. "I've been wanting to show you a horse I bought," he said.

Skinner turned and surveyed the homesteader. His face was expressionless beneath the short, thick beard. His eyes flickered with unreadable impulses and emotions. Slowly he faced the woman again. "Yes, it's a right pretty blanket, ma'am," he repeated. He walked over to the door where his coat and hat hung on a peg. He put them on, and without waiting for the other to precede him he opened the door and stepped outside.

For two days no one in the little cabin slept except in brief snatches. The heavy grayness that lay like a pall over the world crept into the room and into the hearts of the three who waited with grim forebodings for a climax they could not guess. The need of sleep and the strain of suspense left them wordless and drawn. For long periods the stranger lay like one in deep slumber, yet if the man or the woman so much as stirred his eyes were on them, awake, burning, ready.

They had not dared to load the wagon and drive out. Skinner had warned them that the passes were guarded. Even if they were willing to make a fighting dash of it, the ordeal of the journey would certainly reopen the wound in the stranger's shoulder and he would bleed to death. They could only wait and wonder with increasing dread.

WHEN the man Skinner had departed that afternoon, practically at the point of a gun, young Jim resumed his vigil by the window until he was out of sight. Then he turned and faced the man in the bunk.

"Well, mister," he said after a moment, "what about it?"

The man, despite his condition, seemed to have tremendous reserves of strength. He grinned, his face gaunt and pale but touched with a fierce, grim humor. "How do you like sheltering a killer?" he asked in return."

"Never mind how I feel," replied Jim. "I think it's about time you opened your face a bit."

"Do you know that Skinner fellow well?"

"No. I've only met him riding the range."

"Why didn't you agree to what he wanted?" pursued the stranger.

Young Jim made no reply. He stared at the man, holding in check his mounting anger.

"All right," said the stranger, "never mind explaining. I think I understand." He spoke soberly now, though his eyes were warm. "I'm certainly grateful for what you folks have done for me. You don't owe me anything more. If that fellow comes again, or if anybody else is lookin' for me, I want you to keep out of it. You'll only get hurt. If they want me so bad—I guess they'll get me no matter what you do."

"Oh!" cried the woman suddenly, and she put her hands before her eyes. The full import of his words had come to her suddenly. "No, no. They mustn't. They can't!"

The young man moved quickly to her side and put his arms around her. He did not speak, but his face was touched with an odd expression at once tender and grim. The stranger looked up at them, and slowly, ruefully, he smiled.

At the end of the second day, under a dull and leaden sky, the man Skinner returned. He came as before, alone, riding across the level floor of the basin at a steady pace, and when he dismounted at the cabin door his dark face was impassive. No one appeared at the door to greet him; yet his entrance was not barred, and he strode through the portal and closed it behind him with grim deliberation.

"Howdy, ma'am," he said to the woman. She sat with a basket of sewing, near the red blanket which again concealed the bunk. Skinner eyed the man. "You can leave that gun alone," he snapped. "You haven't got a show."

Young Jim waited by the stove, both thumbs hooked in his belt.

"I come to give you a chance," went on the rancher. "Tomorrow a gang will be here. It'll be too late then. You'd better be gone—you and the missus—and you'll be able to come back next spring and find everything just as you left it. I'm ready to take you through tonight."

The homesteader said nothing. The woman, after a moment, crept nearer and clutched his arm. She was chilled and afraid.

Then the rancher turned, stepped to the blanket, and with a jerk, tore it from the nails in the rafter.

What he expected to find is of no importance; what he did find was of tremendous importance to him, for it was the blued barrel of a Colt held steadily in a thin hand, and behind it the cold, unafraid eyes of a man who deals in death. Skinner was no fool. He had blundered, miscalculated, but he was not one to blunder twice. He froze, the blanket trailing to the floor from his stiff hand.

"So you found me at last, eh, Skinner?"

"Yes, we found you," grated the bearded man, "and you know what you're going to get. Put up that gun. It ain't goin' to do you no good now."

"It'll do me a lot of good to take along three-four of you with me."

"They'll burn you alive in this cabin!"

"No, they won't."

Young Jim cursed. "Damned if they will, Skinner!" he cried. "Nobody's going to take a wounded man from my cabin, no matter what he is." He leaped for the rancher and drew the gun from the man's holster. Punching the barrel into Skinner's short ribs he forced him across the room and into a chair. "You say your gang's coming tomorrow morning?" he demanded as he stood above the man. "Well, let 'em come. They'll get a surprise. Kate, hand me that rope."

It was dark, winter dark, and the clouds obscured even the gleam of a single star. They worked without lights, not knowing what keen eyes might be watching through the night. Even before the stove they placed a chair with a blanket thrown across its back, so that its ruddy glow should not betray their frequent passage through the door.

The horses protested at first, caring little for the prospect of unaccustomed work at night, but the man was obdurate, and once he forced the bits between their teeth they quickly submitted. They stood in the traces, restive but willing, while the loading of the wagon was completed, with the wounded stranger in a nest of blankets in the center.

Last of all the man released the bearded one from the chair in which he was bound. Silently the two passed outside, a gun between them, and Skinner mounted to the wagon seat with stiff limbs. He sat there, immobile, wordless.

The woman felt about inside, to assure herself that nothing was forgotten, and with a trace of moisture in her eyes that not even the suspense of that fateful hour could prevent, closed the door on the little house which had been her home for many happy months. Then she climbed into the wagon and settled beside the wounded man.

The homesteader touched the reins and the horses moved ahead into the impenetrable darkness.

The journey was one of travail and suspense. They could see nothing, though their eyes were strained with peering through the weighty dark; and only the crunching of the wheels on the gravel told them they were safely on the trail. The horses, amenable now and sensing the dependence of the humans on them, moved onward at a slow but steady pace. The wagon creaked and groaned, but no other sound came to them out of the night, not even the stirring of the dry grass or the whispering of foliage, for there was no wind. It was cold, with the damp, oppressive feel of snow in the air.

Dawn came slowly. They were in dire need of the light, for the trail now led along a passage between steep wooded slopes, overgrown with piñon pine and little groves of quaking asp. A watercourse ran beside the trail, and a deviation from the narrow path would pile them in wrecked confusion in the gully. The horses had been proceeding slowly, halting at intervals and snorting softly. As the still trees along their way began to stand out in ghostly fashion in the thinning dark the team recovered its assurance and increased the pace. The way was downhill and the animals before long held back as much as they pulled.

THEY came upon him suddenly, around a bend in the trail. He stood in the center of the road, rifle on his arm, peering through the foggy half day at the advancing wagon. He was muffled in a heavy coat and the embers of a fire glowed to one side.

Young Jim, holding the reins in his left hand, gripped the .45 Colt on his lap beneath the coat, and spoke to the sullen, muffled man beside him. "If you say a word out of the way, Skinner, I'll kill you first and take my chances with this guy. Remember, you're coming down with us, and you don't know a thing about the fellow in the back."

Skinner did not reply. Slowly he moistened his lips, staring straight ahead.

"Pull up there, fella," ordered the guard in the road while they were still some paces away. The rifle swung in their direction.

Jim drew the horses to a halt and stared. "Morning," he offered. He eyed the rifle in awed curiosity. "What's up? This road closed?"

"She sure is," declared the guard. He approached, watchful and keen eyed, trying to identify the man with the reins. "What are you doin', drivin' around at this hour, eh? Where you from?"

"Over yonder," replied Jim, jerking a

thumb back the way he had come. "Snow's on the way, and I'm getting out while I can. Probably be a foot deep by noon at that."

The guard was forced to consider this a reasonable excuse for early morning wandering, but he was not satisfied as to the identity of this wagon. He transferred his gaze to the bearded man. The latter sat hunched on the wagon seat, his face half concealed in his upturned coat collar. The guard gave a start of recognition.

"Skinner?" he demanded sharply. "That you?"

The bearded man emerged from the collar. Beneath the coat of the homesteader he could see, could feel, the barrel of the Colt, threatening him. He stared bleakly at the guard and could find nothing to say to his query.

The guard returned the man's stare for a moment in startled mystification. He could not understand Skinner's behavior. In his eyes glowed the sudden, hot fury of an impulsive man.

"What's this mean, Skinner, eh? You skippin' out, fella?" When there still came no reply he grated, "Talk, damn you —talk!"

Skinner became pallid beneath his beard and he shot a glance of appeal to the imperturbable man beside him. He attempted suddenly to speak, stammered, and failed; and in failing, paid a heavy toll for perfidy he had never committed. The rifle in the guard's hands spat flame, and the crack of the shot echoed wildly through the pass. Skinner reared on his feet; gasped, unable to speak; and toppled backward into the road.

The guard, his face snarling, swung the lever of the rifle and threw down on the homesteader. Young Jim brought up the Colt, pale at the shot, and sick at the necessity of killing a man. He did not pull trigger. An explosion came from behind him in the wagon; and the guard reeled as the rifle stock, splintering in his hands, struck him a blow in the stomach. Young Jim whirled, and saw the wounded stranger falling back in his nest of blankets, his mouth gaunt with pain. A wisp of smoke was rising from the six-shooter in his limp hand. The woman scrambled over the bundles to reach him. Then Jim leaped from the wagon and threw himself on the guard.

IT SNOWED. The heavens opened and engulfed the world. Straight falling, silent and white, the snowflakes came to earth and clung damply where they rested. They carpeted the ground, piled in feathery masses on the branches of the motionless pine, smoothed the ruggedness of the soil so that the tracks of a wagon and team had long been hidden on the trail.

In the comfortable, warm room of the down country ranch-house three people waited, listening. The elderly owner of the ranch, the homesteader and the woman sat at the table, the remnants of a meal before them, and only the woman looked up. She was watching her husband.

Three others were present in various states of distress. He who lately had guarded the pass sat lashed to a chair, sullen and smoldering. He was sound of body, for the deflected bullet had not touched him. The man Skinner lay on a pallet on the floor, occasionally groaning. It was likely, when the doctor came, accompanying the sheriff in answer to the telephone call, that his shattered right arm would have to be removed. The lean stranger lay on a cot near the stove, and his eyes were closed. His physical pain, however, the wound that had broken open again, bothered him comparatively little. He was unconscious.

"THAT'S them, I think," said the homesteader. He rose and went to the window. Immediately he pulled on his coat. The elderly rancher was a pace behind when he went out the door. The woman moved to the stove and put a fresh pot of coffee on its glowing center.

"Well!" said the sheriff, as he stood inside the room a moment later, drawing off his gloves and shaking the snow from his coat. He gazed appraisingly at the guard in the chair. "Whitey Davis, eh? And Pete Skinner, too," he added, observing the bearded one. "Not so bad. Not so bad at all."

The homesteader watched the officer, curious and uncertain.

The second of the newcomers, a man stocky and taciturn in contrast to the tall, languid assurance of the officer, doffed his over garments and approached the bearded man without delay. His manner was professional and competent as he ripped open the rude, bulky bandages for inspection.

But the sheriff spoke from beside the cot. "Here, Doc. This fellow first." His voice was crisp. He threw off his coat and hat and knelt to assist.

It was some time before the lean, pale stranger opened his eyes. But in a moment they were clear, and his gaze as he studied the face of the sheriff above was firm.

"Well, Dan'l," remarked the officer, "you comin' along now?"

The man smiled. "Tol'able, Andy." His voice was weak, despite the coolness of clean dressings on his angry wound and the warmth that spread from the whisky they had fed him.

"I was gettin' worried," said Andy, "but you never liked interference."

The smile was rueful. "I was kinda needin' it, Andy, this time. Friends yonder obliged."

The young couple stood side by side across the room. Jim came closer. He stared narrowly. "This fellow—" he began to the sheriff. "You mean—"

"My chief deputy," said the officer, answering the question in Jim's voice.

Deputy Dan'l's eyes gleamed.

"But—good Lord!" exclaimed young Jim. "Why didn't you tell me?"

An inscrutable glance was exchanged between the officers.

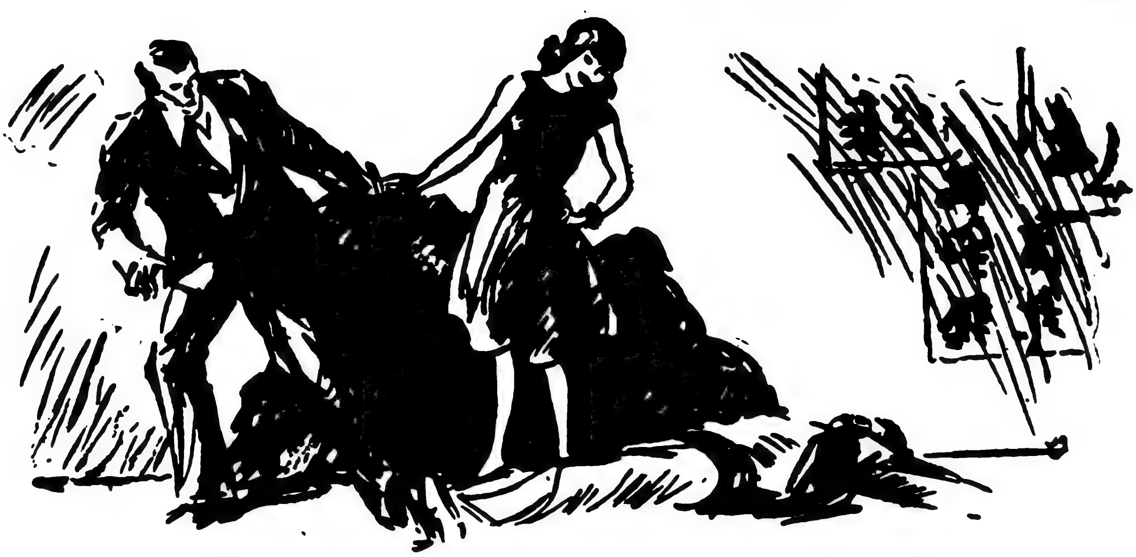
"I can guess," remarked Andy, "I can guess that with a hanging or hangings due in his vicinity, Deputy Dan'l wanted his own to be plumb exclusive and in keeping with his official dignity, and no amateur competition. That right, Dan'l?"

Young Jim stared at the sheriff, but the woman, as she dropped beside Deputy Dan'l and grasped his hand, cried softly, "I know. Oh, I know!"

And then young Jim knew too. He uttered an awed exclamation. "And you let me think you a killer—"

It was odd that Dan'l should so suddenly be very tired. He ignored Jim. "Andy," he said, "I'm a sick man. Gimme another shot of that redeye. I got to sleep some today."

And chuckling, Andy obliged.



Adventure by Night in Chinese Streets

CITIES *of* FEAR

By CLEMENTS RIPLEY

JOHN BASSET was disappointed in Macao. The red and blue, flat-roofed houses that had been so pretty from the passage had turned out to be rather ordinary places at close range; the European quarter was like any other European quarter; and the Chinese section, back from the Praya, was the usual maze of narrow, twisting alleys, with the usual dirt and smells and hurrying yellow men who screamed and jostled and got in the way, and who obviously had no idea of sanitation or cleanliness.

Of course he might have known what to expect. When you had seen one place out here you had seen them all—heat, dirt, flies, smells, and Chinese or Malays or Filipinos or Japanese or whatever the local population happened to be.

The only surprising thing about it was how Ellie kept up her enthusiasm. Women, he decided, had a remarkable faculty for seeing, hearing and smelling only what they wanted to. Now here was Ellie, a miracle of daintiness who could hardly bear to have his old hunting clothes in the house at home, and she could stand rapt, in the midst of the filth and nastiness of a Chinese street, breathing in the germs of heaven knew what loathsome diseases, and murmuring phrases like "the immemorial mystery of Asia" and "the cradle of civilization" and never turn a hair.

Just now she was standing in front of a trinket vendor's stall, back a little way from the Praya, fingering a string of jade beads alternating with clusters of tiny seed pearls.

"Look, dear. Aren't they sweet?"

She held them against her throat as she spoke and smiled prettily.

John Basset was hot and tired and he had the beginnings of a headache, besides which the new shoes he had bought in Hongkong hurt him. He took the string and ran it over his hand in a careless scrutiny and tossed it back into the tray.

"Very pretty. But they're fakes, of course." . . . He turned to the old, spectacled Chinese who squatted behind the low counter.

"How much?"

The old man was contemplating the dragon banner on a balcony opposite and seemed not to have heard. But Ellie flushed uncomfortably.

"But, dearie, he says they're real."

The little rising inflection was a protest against this bald assault on the vendor's feelings. Ellie was a gentle soul.

And ordinarily it was just this trustful gentleness that John Basset adored in her. But this afternoon with his shoes hurting him and half the yellow, screaming population in Macao bumping him and jostling and yelling in his ears, he gave way a little to his impatience. And besides, all the rest of the party had gone back to the ship.

He said, "Oh, of course he does, dear. You mustn't believe everything anybody tells you. Why anyone could see they're fakes."

He turned back to the old Chinese. . . . "Fakes, of course," he repeated. "How much?"

The old man's eyes continued fixed on the balcony. "Real jade," he insisted gently. "Hund'ed twenty-fi' dolla'."

"Not a chance," John Basset told him shortly, and to his wife, "Come on, Ellie, let's get back to the ship. We'll get a real string in Hongkong at one of the English stores. You don't want people to laugh at you for getting stung with an imitation, Come on."

But Ellie lingered. She picked up the string again, hesitantly, and smiled a little, eager smile—propitiating.

"But they are lovely, darling, even if they are imitation. I don't mind. I know I'm foolish, but I do want them to go with my green velvet. I'll buy them out of my own money, dear."

John Basset shrugged. He turned to the jade merchant impatiently.

"Look here, I'll give you twenty-five and that's every cent I will give. Take it or leave it."

The old, wrinkled face was serene. "Real jade," he murmured. "Hund'ed twenty-fi' dolla'." He didn't even trouble to lower his gaze. John Basset found his total lack of emotion somehow insulting, as though the man didn't care enough about his opinion to resent it.

Perhaps if the dealer had admitted that the beads were imitation he might have ended by making the sale even at that price. Ellie wanted them, and a hundred and twenty-five dollars wasn't a great deal to John Basset. He didn't object to paying an outrageously high price occasionally to indulge a whim. But he did object to being thought an easy mark. And he had said the beads were imitation.

He muttered something that sounded like, "Go to hell, then," and seizing his wife by the arm he propelled her rapidly towards the Praya.

BY THE time they were clear of the Chinese quarter and could walk without having to thrust bodily through a wall of yellow, clamoring humanity he had cooled a little and was beginning to feel ashamed.

"I didn't mean to be unpleasant, honey," he justified himself as they strolled by the administration buildings. "But honestly, that fellow got my goat. He was so sure of getting a sucker that he wouldn't look at my twenty-five—and I'll bet that's twice what they're worth."

Ellie smiled forgivingly. "It's all right, dear. But—you don't suppose they could have been real, and that's why he wouldn't take it?"

John Basset snorted. "My dear girl! Real jade in a filthy little hole-in-the-wall half the size of a Greek fruit stand? You'd be a pretty easy mark, wouldn't you, honey? You have to watch your step with 'em," he went on with the positiveness of a knowledge gained by three months in the East. "They aren't like folks at home. They're out for all they can get, and they'll have your eye-teeth if you give 'em a chance."

She gave his arm a little squeeze. "I'm afraid I'm foolish," she admitted. "But somehow it seems awful to come right out and call a man a cheat—right to his face. That old Chinaman—"

He laughed indulgently. That was one of the things about Ellie, her gentleness.

"Why, sweetheart," he told her reassuringly, "you needn't worry about that old bird's feelings. Somebody probably calls him a crook a dozen times a day. The thing that hurt his feelings was not getting your hundred and twenty-five dollars.

"That's just business with them," he went on, enlarging on his theme. "Cheat a man if you can, and then lose all respect for him. They—well, they're clever enough in a way, I suppose. Imitators. They pick up the surface things, but no amount of teaching 'll ever convince a Chinaman that it isn't better to cheat a man and make an enemy of him than to satisfy him and make a good customer. And that's why they don't get anywhere—rotten with graft.

They're like hand-organ monkeys. You can teach 'em to pick up the pennies, but you can't make 'em understand what it's all about."

"But, John dear, Professor Parker says—"

He snorted again. Professor Parker was a ship acquaintance, who fed Ellie's enthusiasm for the Chinese. He was an authority on the Middle Kingdom—whatever that was. John Basset regarded him with the mixture of approbation and condescension with which an average American business man usually regards a savant —or a trick horse.

"I've heard him," he told her. "Marvelous civilization! Invented gunpowder, or something, didn't they—and then used it for making firecrackers. . . . Good Lord, if they've got any civilization why don't they do something with it—clean up their towns for instance?

"Look at this!" He swept his hand in a vague gesture that took in the magnificent curve of the Praya. "These buildings and all stuck up here in front for show. Go back there a block and you find a solid two miles of tumbledown rookeries—streets that you couldn't get a rickshaw through, let alone a car.

"Oh, I know," he forestalled her objection hastily, "the Portuguese are just as bad. But this Chinese civilization—why don't they use it to develop their own resources instead of expecting us to do it for 'em? Look at the American firms, the British—"

"But, dearie, isn't that just the trouble? If we didn't exploit them so—"

"My dear girl, doesn't that prove it? If they were capable of handling their own affairs they wouldn't let us exploit them."

"I suppose there is something in that," Ellie mused. "But I wonder—perhaps if we knew them better—"

John Basset's shoes began to hurt in a new place. He said, "Well, believe me I know 'em as well as I want to. Talk about civilization. Monkeys is what they are, just monkeys. And not even funny ones after the first few days. I'm sick of the lot of 'em if you ask me——"

He stopped suddenly with an inward groan, and thought, "Oh Lord, now I've done it!" for the face Ellie turned to him was startled and her eyes were troubled.

This was Ellie's trip, the honeymoon, seven years delayed, that they had planned ever since they were married and so far she was enjoying it with an almost childish enthusiasm. And John Basset would enjoy it too, to the last, or pretend to, rather than spoil her fun by letting her know that he wasn't having a good time. And so, for three solid months now, he had kept a smile on his face and a watch on his tongue—to the end, apparently, that a new pair of shoes and a little, momentary irritation should upset the whole careful scheme.

Ellie's honeymoon. . . .

"You utter fool," he almost groaned aloud, and turned the conversation hastily in the vain hope that perhaps she would forget it.

She followed his leads sweetly and pleasantly enough, and for a moment he thought he had fooled her, but when he looked again there was still that little troubled look far back in her eyes, and he knew that she had found him out.

By the time they had dressed and the bugle blew for dinner, he knew it in a thousand little ways that he could not have explained to save his life, although she had not said a word. She wouldn't, of course. She would never let him see that his attempt to make her trip a happy one had broken down. Ellie was like that.

But it was there, and it caused an indefinable constraint between them that made him unhappy and uncomfortable so that he was vaguely moody and abstracted all through dinner. He knew that she saw that, too, and afterwards, when some of the men made up a party to go ashore for a discreet peep at vice in the shape of the gambling rooms he refused to go on the plea of a headache.

When she urged him to go he made things worse by saying that he really didn't care anything about it, but that he would take her if she wanted him to.

"You're so sweet, dear," she told him quickly in answer to that. "But I'm a little tired and I'm going to play some bridge with the Cummingses and Professor Parker. . . . Really, dear, I'd rather do that than go ashore."

She kissed him and he went back to the state-room to lie down and to see her refusing to let him take her on any number of little trips from now on because she was afraid he would be bored.

ALONE, with his shoes off, flat on his back, he became the lowest thing that walked. He had spoiled her afternoon; he had taken the fun out of her trip (he thought of the yellowed pile of steamship folders that had grown, year after year, in the corner of her desk); he had kicked the props out from under her little, innocent thrill over the Chinese—and he hadn't even let her get the beads she wanted. A little string of jade beads that Ellie wanted and that would have cost about what he would have lost if he had gone to the Casino tonight.

That brought him to a sudden decision. There was one thing he could do. Having ruined her trip he might in decency salvage that much for her—and he would. He would surprise her with them when she came in. And she would be so appreciative. Ellie always made any little thing of that sort so much fun to do.

It was humiliating, of course, to go back and pay that Chinaman's price after all that had been said this afternoon, but, well he deserved to eat crow anyway.

It only took a minute to slip into a suit of tweeds. He stopped at the purser's office to get some money, but he purposely didn't tell anyone that he was going ashore because Ellie might miss him and make inquiries and he wanted it to be a surprise. He would come right back anyway, and they didn't sail until midnight.

The streets of the Chinese quarter do not lend themselves to rickshaw travel. He drove up the Praya until he was opposite the street of the shop and left his rickshaw there and went on on foot.

If the old Chinese recognized him this time he said nothing. He laid out half a dozen strings and fixed his eyes on the dragon banner on the balcony while John Basset made his selection.

"How much this one?" . . . He was relieved that the old man had evidently forgotten him.

"That one real jade. . . . Hund'ed twenty-fi' dolla'."

He paid out the notes and put the string in his pocket. And then, turning to go, he hesitated.

It had occurred to him that if he went back by the Praya he would be likely to meet some of the party from the ship. That would be embarrassing in view of the fact that he had refused to go with them earlier in the evening. He would have to think up some excuse, and more than likely there would be some heavy-handed joking about his wandering around a town like Macao alone at night. Some idiot might even get the idea that he had taken the chance while his wife was playing bridge to slip away and go on the loose.

He decided that if he went back through the Chinese quarter there wouldn't be much chance of meeting anyone. He knew the general direction and he could keep parallel to the Praya.

Thrusting through the crowd that milled and jostled in the flicker of the smoky oil flares, he thought of a phrase he had heard Ellie use, "the mysterious currents of the East," and he snorted. Mysterious, huh? Dirt and noise and crowding and shiftlessness, and a smell like rotten fish! If you could find anything mysterious in that—

He shouldered aside to avoid a beggar with sore, streaming eyes, and his distaste for the Orient became acute. . . . Rambling firetraps of houses, propped with flimsy, bamboo poles. Apparently when a thing was ready to fall out here they jacked it up with something else and trusted to luck. . . . Rank, garlicky smells. . . . Dim, paper lanterns, and the flicker of torch light on yellow faces. Yellow men everywhere, underfoot, trampling, jostling, screaming in his ears.

The Lord only knew what diseases might be loose in this crowd. He began to wish he had stuck to the Praya and risked meeting people.

There was a cross street with a feeble light a couple of hundred yards down. It seemed to be deserted, and he wondered if it wouldn't lead to some other street that would take him back to the Praya by a way less crowded.

He hesitated with the yellow sea swirling around him and decided to try it. The first turn to the left should bring him out somewhere near the landing stage, he thought.

It was a dark little alley, and the dirt underfoot, trodden hard by thousands of bare feet, felt greasy even through his shoe-soles. By spreading his arms he could have touched the walls on either hand. Twice he stood aside while someone padded by him on felt shoes, and once when a door opened he saw a littered room and heard a gabble of speech that was neither

English nor Chinese. . . . He supposed it was Portuguese and that he was in some poorer Portuguese quarter.

He had a feeling of sweating, teeming life, packed behind the dark walls on either side. The air was sticky with it, suffocating, like sleeping with your head under the bedclothes. It seemed to him that those houses gave off a faint, steady whisper, like the rustle of an ant hill. He wished that he had stuck to the Praya. He was not afraid exactly, but he was glad of the light ahead.

As HE came nearer he saw that there were two people, a man and a woman, standing just inside the circle of light. He thought they were quarrelling, for the man's voice sounded angry and he was gripping her by the wrist. He was thickset and looked rather powerful, and his face, in the light, was fat and oily, with a heavy mustache. John Basset could not see the woman very well, but she gave an impression of youth and a certain lithe slimness.

He was about a dozen steps away when she threw back her head and laughed insolently, whereupon the man slapped her heavily across the mouth—twice—so that she half fell against the wall.

It was probably the first time that John Basset had ever seen a man hit a woman, and the effect on him was instant and curious.

He drew a quick, shuddering breath, like a man suddenly plunged into a cold bath. He could actually feel the blows on his own face. Without stopping to think he drove in, and his attack was so swift and so savage that the man had only time to throw up an arm to his head before he hit him.

It was a matter of ten years since John Basset had played end for Yale, but golf and the gymnasium had kept him in reasonably good shape, and in addition to the cold rage that backed his arm there was several hours' concentrated irritation with Macao and everything connected with it. He hit hard, and with the smack of his fist the sane, ordered world that he knew crumbled into swift ruin.

The man's head snapped back and he took a couple of stumbling, backward steps, dragging the girl by the wrist. She fell against him, and as she did it seemed to John Basset that she struck him in the chest with a curious gesture.

The man let go of her wrist and straightened, slowly, with his hands above his head and the fingers curved like talons. Then he let out a long breath, "e-e-e-e-e!" horribly like the squeal of a pig, and toppled over stiffly under the light.

John Basset saw her stoop and wipe a knife on his coat and return it to the bosom of her dress. Then he understood.

Everything seemed to move very slowly. He said, "Now you've done it," in a strange, flat voice. He wet his lips, his body felt perfectly numb. . . . The man's hands were fat, with black hairy backs. They twitched once or twice and were still.

Everything was still. The girl looked down at the body and touched it experimentally with her foot.

He said, "Don't do that!" sharply. He had the same feeling about touching it that he would have had about touching a snake.

A window banged open somewhere in the darkness and a voice called out excitedly. The girl started. She caught hold of his sleeve and drew him swiftly out of the circle of light.

They stood there a moment, listening. Another window opened. A woman screamed out some question. There was a pounding of running feet in the direction from which he had come.

She tugged at his sleeve. "Be still," she whispered. "Come wit' me." She was pulling him down the alley. He was still too dazed to do anything but obey.

And then, with amazing suddenness the little, dark place was filled with life. People shouted from the windows, lights flared. A yellow shaft cut the blackness just in front of them, and as they pressed back against the wall a man ran out of the open door. He was in trousers and undershirt, with flopping slippers and his suspenders down. He charged past without seeing them.

John Basset looked back. There was a little, black knot of people under the light now, shrill, excited, all talking at once. He saw the gold lace and cocked hat of a Portuguese policeman.

It was the girl who checked his first, blind impulse to run and brought him to a standstill with her clutch on his arm.

"Be still! . . . Listen!" she cautioned.

It was a moment before he understood. Then he heard it—hurrying feet in the darkness ahead—coming towards them.

"Come quicklee!"

Almost before he knew how it happened she had drawn him into the doorway, the one from which he had seen the man in the undershirt come.

A single oil lamp in a wall bracket at the foot of a flight of stairs showed a narrow hallway with doors opening from each side. He saw this much before she pulled him back in and blew the lamp out.

Standing there in the dark he had a great many confused thoughts out of which two stood clearly, that he had just seen a murder and that he must get clear just as quickly and quietly as he could.

But not yet. He couldn't go out until things quieted down outside.

The hall was furry with the thick smell of unwashed bodies. He caught his breath, chokingly, and the girl cautioned, "Quiet! Be still!" She was holding onto his hand now with little, nervous squeezings of her fingers. He could feel the rise and fall of her breast, close to his shoulder.

Then it came to him that very probably he was an accessory before the fact, and for a moment he had a sensation as of fine, cold sand trickling between his shoulder-blades. But that wasn't possible — it simply wasn't possible. He was John Basset, president of the Basset Paper Box Company. He was an American. He couldn't be mixed up in a thing like this. He must get out of here, of course.

He thought, "But the police—" and then he thought that if he simply told the policeman the facts the man would thank him and salute, and he would go on his way to the ship. After all he had nothing to do with these, these monkeys.

THE feeling was strong on him that this was all a sort of play in which he had, by some accident, managed to stray upon the stage. . . . He had only to explain who he was and someone would show him back to his seat. They must see that he was an outsider, that he couldn't have anything to do with the show. . . . That wouldn't be possible.

And all the while in another part of his mind another process of thought was going on, a series of frantic pictures.

He saw himself being hauled off to the police station—questioned—held as a witness. He saw the courtroom, the newspaper headlines. People, his friends, talking. "Got mixed up in a killing somewhere in the Orient. . . . Portuguese girl hooked up in it some way. . . . Hard on his wife—"

It was a very bad five minutes or so that he spent before he became aware of the pressure of his companion's hand, guiding him towards the street door, and drew a long breath of relief.

It seemed to him that if he could only once get out of this house and back to Ellie and her cool, gentle sanity nothing could ever touch him again. The hall seemed incredibly long when they had to move so cautiously.

They had gone perhaps half a dozen steps when he felt her shrink back against him with a little gasp of dismay, and at the same instant he heard the flip-flop of slippers and saw the loom of a figure in the vague rectangle of the street door. The man who had run past them a few minutes ago had come back.

John Basset caught his breath and flattened himself against the wall. The man came in, his slippers flip-flopping, and stood for a moment almost within reach of his arm. He was evidently surprised at finding the light out for he hesitated and grumbled something in Portuguese. Then he reached for the street door and slammed it.

There was a moment of fumbling after that, and then the grating of a key turned in a lock. John Basset felt the grip on his hand tighten with a sudden, frightened tensity and went weak in the legs.

They were locked in.

They heard him grunting and feeling around in the dark for a little and then one of the doors in the hall opened and closed again, and there were muffled stumblings and an oath from one of the adjoining rooms. Then there was the scratch of a match and a crack of light showed.

John Basset's fingers, already feeling swiftly in the dark, touched the metal plate of the street door lock and found the key-hole. The key was gone.

There was a moment when he came very near to crying out like an animal in a trap and battering at the door. He steadied himself and tried to think what to do.

He tried the knob, very cautiously, and put his knee against the casing and pulled. It stood fast. He dropped his hands and drew a long breath and let it out again. The thing was unbelievable, impossible. Things like this simply didn't happen. He was John Basset, president of the Basset Paper Box Company, with a home on Oak Avenue and—these things didn't happen to people of his sort. They simply didn't happen.

He was conscious that his companion was pulling at his wrist, trying to drag him back towards the stairs. He gave way a step or two. Here, this wouldn't do! He mustn't get any deeper into this. The thing to do was to get out of here.

He stopped. "Listen, you wait here. I'll get the key from that fellow—"

She clutched suddenly at his arms. "No! No, I say—no! You do not 'onstan'." Then, " 'E will kill you!"

He caught his breath. Then he remembered that he was John Basset of the Basset Paper Box Company, with a home on Oak Avenue, and holding fast to a world where things were ordered and secure, he smiled.

"Oh, nonsense!" There was a comfortable substantialness to the word, even whispered in the darkness. He stood solidly on his heels, baulking her efforts to pull him towards the stairs. "Nonsense! I'll simply tell him we were locked in by mistake and ask him—"

"No, I say—oh, be quiet!" She thrust close up to him and stood on tip-toe so that her breath tickled his ear. There was a hint of a nervous giggle in her whisper. " 'E will kill you, I say. 'E will think you 'ave come after 'is wife!"

Nothing could have been more real than the sincerity of her alarm. And suddenly John Basset realized that the world he knew was far away. His shoulders sagged, he let her draw him down the hall towards the stairs.

"We mos' get out this way. Come now —verree quiet!"

She went up first and he followed, feeling cautiously for each step as he put his weight on it. He knew it was insane, absurd, but he bent his will to going up without making a sound.

The dark seemed to shut in closer and denser as they went up. He twitched his shoulders as if he could throw it off like a tangible thing. The ship and Ellie and all the safe, familiar things seemed to have been removed to another planet. Everything he knew was swept away and there remained only the dark and the stealthy creak of floor boards.

His foot, feeling for the next step, found none, and he knew they had come to the second floor. The rail turned, and he followed it along another little, dark hallway, just touching it with his fingertips. There was a greasy, scummy feel to it that set his teeth on edge.

He could hear the girl moving just ahead, and he hoped she knew where they were going. Once, in something like panic at the idea of being left alone in this sticky blackness he reached out and touched her, and she gave his arm a little reassuring pat.

They came to a second flight of stairs. This must be the last, he thought, for the houses of Macao as he remembered them from this afternoon were low, three stories at most. Low, square houses, jammed up together—crawling with packed, sweating life. . . . Like maggots—

And just then he stumbled noisily, tried to catch himself, and went headlong with a crash that seemed to shake the whole building.

There was a startled gasp from the girl. He scrambled to his feet and felt her hand, groping, clutching at him.

"Oh Maria! Come now, come quick! Oh—!"

A door had banged open somewhere below and a voice called out a startled question. Another answered.

"This way. Oh, be quick!"

He stumbled up behind her, half thrown off his balance by her frightened straining at his hand, while the house quickened into life below.

Doors banged. Bare feet padded in the halls. A light flared on the street floor. Voices rose in an excited babble. They were feeling their way along the upper landing now, rapidly, cautiously. He heard her whisper, "Quick now—oh, hurree, hurree."

THEN, quite suddenly and right at hand, a woman screamed.

It was as hideously unexpected as a striking snake. John Basset stopped dead. And the woman kept on screaming, shriek after shriek that cut through the dark in red, jagged streaks.

"Shut up! Shut up, you—damn' fool! Oh, shut up—shut up!" He was stumbling around in the dark, hands outstretched. If he could have reached her in that moment he would have strangled her in sheer terror.

A sudden pain shot through his thumb and through his wrist and up into his elbow. That cleared his brain with a snap, and he became aware that his companion was pulling at him—tugging at his arms and shoulders, straining frantically. He stumbled after, she half dragging him, panting with the effort, until, right above him, he saw a square of clean starlight.

It was a trap door to the roof she had brought him to and there was a ladder by his hand. She was pushing at him now—beating at him with her fists. "Go up! Go up!" And the woman behind them still screamed. And the pain in his thumb had numbed his arm to the elbow.

"Go up! Go up quick!"

He heard the rush of feet on the stairs. His panic had gone, and in its place there was a queer, cold thrill. He picked her up in the crook of his arm and half lifted, half flung her against the ladder.

"Go on up yourself," he commanded, and she went in a swirl of skirts, with a little, sobbing cry that was half surprise and half relief.

He followed with a rush. There was a crash and a spurt of flame in the hall behind him, and as he flung himself over the top he realized, quite calmly, but with some amazement, that some one had shot at him.

Below, the screams redoubled. He scrambled up and they darted around a chimney and raced across a flat roof and swung over a low coping. Behind them were shouts and startled, sleepy outcries as the tumult stirred up the neighboring roofs.

"This way—verree quiet!"

They were crouched behind a coping. She touched his arm and beckoned, and he followed her, creeping along its shadow, until they came to what seemed to be a small cupola. There she stopped, listening.

The noise of pursuit had ceased by now, and presently the sleepers began to settle down again. She sank down against the wall, and John Basset dropped beside her and wiped his forehead on his coat sleeve.

"Ah! They 'ave not seen us. 'Ere then we are safe I think, for a little time."

He drew a breath of relief and relaxed. From below came the yellow glow of the city, and above were the stars. Up here the noise of the streets was a faint, steady hum, and the air was warm and steamy, with a half imagined, spicy tang that reminded him vaguely of tea.

Away to the right swung the glittering curve of the Praya, and beyond, the harbour mirrored the lights of the shipping. He looked at it for a moment or so before startled recognition broke on him.

It was as near as that, and that cluster of lights with the blue one at the end must be the *President Pierce!* He stared across the hot, teeming roofs with a catch at his breath. Why he could almost pick out the card-room! Ellie, sitting at the card table, cool in the draught of the electric fans, sitting with the Cummingses and Professor Parker, chatting the small, inconsequential things that made up her world.

It gave him a queer feeling of unreality to think of it—as though he were watching her from another world. Ellie, sweet and cool and gentle and well-loved.

He sat up quickly and the movement made him conscious of the pain in his thumb. He had forgotten it for the moment, but now it began to ache and throb again. He felt it gingerly and his fingers came away sticky.

He wrapped it with his handkerchief, absently, his eyes fixed on the lights of the ship.

Beside him there was a little, sympathizing hiss of indrawn breath. He heard her say, "Oh—your 'and! . . . I 'ad forgot."

He said, "It's nothing. I must have hurt it some way back there."

"Ah, but no!" She hesitated. Then, with a little, low laugh, "It is me—I did bite it."

"Bite it?" He turned to stare at her. "You bit me?"

"But *si*—like this." She clicked her teeth together. "An' you did not know? Bicos' I was frightened in the dark. Oh, an' that woman, she scrimmed—an' you would not come—"

"Good Lord!" said John Basset. "Good Lord!" This thing was getting fantastic beyond belief.

"And now you are angree? Ah, but no—you are not. You are American an' American man is nevaire angree wit' woman. Not like Portuguese man. An' I was frightened you do not know—"

JOHN BASSET did not care to be reminded of that moment in the dark hallway. He shifted hastily to the first subject that came to hand.

"That man, the one you—" He left the sentence unfinished, stumped by the difficulty of finding a tactful synonym for "murdered."

She stared across the roofs at the gleaming Praya and shrugged one shoulder. "Oh, that? 'E was my 'osban'," she said calmly. "I did nevaire like 'im moch—that one. An' when you came so quick out from the dark, I was frightened. I am like that when I am frightened," she added simply. "An' now I am sorree—a little."

It was her voice, not the amazing words, that caught John Basset's attention. It was low and a little husky, but with a peculiar vibrant quality—like herself, very much alive somehow. Vivid, was the word that came to him. It was not a word he was accustomed to use; he was even a little vague as to its meaning. But it seemed to express her, he thought. Vivid!

She was half lying against the wall, with her feet curled under her. Her face was in the shadow, but he caught the gleam of her bare arm and the white curve of her throat in the hot starlight. Somehow that swift instant under the street lamp was hard to realize.

It surprised him that he could feel this way about it. He wasn't condoning what she had done or defending her—it just didn't any of it seem important, somehow. It all seemed so long ago!

She was saying, pensively, "I was bad girl, I guess—made 'im verree angree—"

She broke off and got to her feet and smoothed her skirt with a gesture of decision. "Well, any'ow we mos' not rimain 'ere. Come."

He was amazed to find how tired he was. The reaction from the strain he had undergone, he supposed. He hated to plunge into it again.

Then he thought, "Good Lord, I wonder what time it is?" and he pulled out his watch hastily, and clumsily because of the bandaged thumb.

Half past ten! That didn't seem possible. He shook it and held it to his ear and looked again. Half past ten, dim in the starlight.

He had hardly been gone from the ship an hour. He would have guessed at least three. He breathed easier after that. There was still plenty of time to get back, if nothing went wrong.

"Now where?" he asked with a certain jauntiness.

She considered. Then, with decision, "Come, I know a way, I think. But you mos' be verree quiet now, an' keep in the dark. People sleeping all about, an' if some man see you 'e will think you 'ave come after 'is woman—an' 'e kill you firs' an' ask after."

He thought, "I suppose that's the Latin of it, or the Oriental." In Macao they didn't take you for a burglar, but a lover and they killed without waiting to find out. And then the full force of what he had let himself in for struck him.

Suppose something went wrong, and he were caught up here on the roofs and killed. Would anyone ever understand that the whole thing had been an insane, fantastic accident? . . . Americans—they didn't kill lightly, on suspicion. They waited for proof—and what better proof was there than the killing. Would anyone believe that he would have been killed if he hadn't been guilty? . . . He thought he was beginning to understand how innocent men accused of crime sometimes go mad.

"This way," she was saying. "Oh verree quiet now!" and he slipped after her into the shadow of a wall, thinking hard.

If anything happened to him he supposed it would all come out. At the best he was mixed up in a stabbing in a bad quarter of a very bad city. At the worst he was an accessory (now was it Continental law or military law that held a man guilty until he was proved innocent?) and he had run from the police with the dead man's wife, who did the stabbing. It was fairly complete. And what would Ellie——

"S-st!"

She had stopped with her hand on his arm. He could feel her shoulder rise and fall to her quickened breathing.

The man was standing thirty or forty feet away beside some sort of a screened enclosure. He had not seen them yet, evidently, for he yawned and stretched as though he had been asleep and had just waked up. And then he came towards them, aimlessly, with uncertain steps that seemed to be still drugged with sleep.

John Basset felt a tremor in the hand on his arm, and he held his breath. Once the man stopped and seemed of two minds whether to go back, but he yawned again and came on. A big bull of a man in a striped sleeping suit. He was only five steps away now, four, three.

John Basset straightened suddenly and hit him with all his strength. The man swayed once and dropped loosely on his back with a jarring thud.

A low, excited laugh came from behind him, a murmur, "Ah! you are strong!" He had time to wonder grimly if she would ever guess what pure terror had backed that smash.

A sleepy voice called out from the screen enclosure, and then again—frightened and urgent this time. He crouched back into the shadow.

"Quick now! They will come out to see!"

Then they were off, running along the wall, doubling around chimneys, racing across the open. A swift rush through the hot dark with the roofs rising behind them. He scrambled to the top of a six foot wall like a cat and swung her up after him. They dropped on the other side. A bench loaded with flower pots went over with a rousing crash. Startled yells went up from a dozen places at once.

"This way, come this way."

He saw her flit across to the cover of a chimney. He followed. A white form sprang at him. He stooped and met it with the body-check of foot-ball days, heard a grunt, and saw a flying sprawl of arms and legs. Then he heard her call and saw her vanish and plunged after her down a steep flight of stairs that seemed never ending, and brought up sweating in a steamy blackness.

He could hear her feeling about in the dark. "It should be 'ere—it should be 'ere!" pantingly. Then a breathless muttering in Portuguese, and then, triumphantly, "Listen!"

Somewhere near at hand there was a muffled gabble of talk and the click and clatter of knives and forks and dishes.

He heard her fumbling again. "It should be 'ere—the door. Ah!" There was a click and a vertical streak of light. The sounds from the next room were suddenly clear. Then, with a breathless, "Come—sit down quicklee!" she opened the door and slipped through, dragging him after her by the sleeve.

He blinked in the sudden glare. She shut the door behind them, and then, swiftly, but with no appearance of haste, she crossed to a vacant table and slipped into a chair.

He followed, still a little blinded and bewildered. They were in a room full of little tables, most of them occupied. One or two people looked up curiously, but for the most part they paid no attention.

He straightened his tie automatically and passed a hand over his hair. She leaned across the table, resting her chin on her hand, smiling with bold, provocative eyes. She was whispering. . . . "Do not turn. They are looking for us at the door there. Talk—laugh—"

John Basset stiffened. Out of the corner of his eye he could just see the door they had come in by. It had opened again and a yellow-white face peered around the jamb, searching the room swiftly.

"Do not turn!" She slapped the table-top with her bare forearm and hand. She threw back her head with a quick toss and laughed.

Even through the tension of the moment he caught it and recognized it for a consummate piece of acting. The laugh, the whole gesture, established them as certainly as a printed label—the casual tourist from one of the ships, seeing a bit of life and manifestly out of place in his surroundings, and the Portuguese girl he had picked up, and who was earning her money by being vivacious and amusing.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the door close softly.

"Ah, Maria!" It was a soft, relaxing sigh, hardly a sound at all. John Basset breathed again and glanced over the room.

IT WAS an ugly little place. The low, white ceiling, and the walls were streaked and grimy. The two windows on one side were closed and shuttered and the unshaded electric lights burned blue through a hot haze of cigarette smoke and much-breathed air and kitchen smells. The room was filled with a steady, high-pitched gabble and the clatter of dishes, and in one corner there was a click and rattle of dice, table poundings, and the occasional clink of coins.

The people at the tables seemed to be chiefly Portuguese, with here and there the sallow yellow of the Eurasian (mostly women, these) and in one corner a group of American sailors, noisily drunk. He could have hugged them. He remembered seeing a war-ship in the passage this morning, coming in.

That made him think of the ship and he looked at his watch uneasily.

She shook her head. "Mos' wait," she told him quickly. "Drink something. We can not go without."

There was reason in that. He nodded. "I could use a drink myself—whew!" It was amazing. Only ten minutes gone since he had looked at his watch in the starlight, back by the cupola, and already those happenings were beginning to be dim and unreal.

A Chinese waiter in a soiled white jacket with "U. S. S. Buffalo" on the collar padded up on felt shoes and took their order. She leaned back, with her hands clasped on the table, and her body, young and rounded under her scant, sleazy dress relaxed against her chair.

It was the first chance John Basset had had to see her in the light. She looked young, amazingly young; a slim little thing with dark, sultry eyes and a vivid, scarlet mouth. Her hair was blue-black against the creamy pallor of her skin and a loop of it had tumbled loosely across her forehead.

Even in repose there was about her a sense of life, unquenchable, vibrant. He tried telling himself deliberately, "Less than an hour ago I saw that girl murder her husband," and the words seemed utterly meaningless. She looked like an impudent child who had been experimenting with her mother's lip-stick. She had no more to do with the ethics of murder than an English sparrow.

But the thing was there in all its ugliness. He leaned forward on an impulse. "Look here—we'll have to find some way to get you out of this mess."

It seemed to puzzle her for a moment. Then her face cleared.

"Oh, that!" She dismissed it with a flick of her thumb. "That is aw-right. I 'ave plentee frands to 'ide me. One month, two month, all is forgot. 'E was bad man. 'E is daid. 'Oo cares?"

"Yes, but the police won't look at it that way."

The child said, quite calmly, "I am bad girl. I am frand wit' all thee police."

The boy came just then with two small drinks—the raw, oily Scotch, made in Japan for the Chinese trade. John Basset waited until he had set them on the table and gone.

Then, under cover of the noise about them, he said, "Look here, can't you realize that this thing is serious? It's—well, it's murder. You can't just laugh that off, you know."

She grinned impudently and put her hand over his where it lay on the table. Instinctively he looked around, embarrassed, to see if any one had noticed. His uneasiness seemed to amuse her.

She said mockingly, "My frand, 'ere in Macao we can laugh aneething off. An' besides nobodee saw me but you."

She gave his hand a little familiar squeeze, and her look said that here was a delightful secret that they shared between them.

It was a very uncomfortable thing to be reminded of. He took his hand away hastily. "But see here, I'd feel better if you could get out of the country for a little anyway. If you need money—"

"But why?" Her eyes were wide with innocence.

"Good Lord, if you can't see—suppose something did happen. I'd be held as a witness—"

"Ah! An' your wife would 'ave a fit. She would—no, she would not kill you—she is American. But she would 'ave revenge. She would divorce you alive. An' all your frands would laugh at you. 'Orrible! But it will not 'appen."

John Basset went a dull red. The terrible child smiled calmly and said, "Ah! Now you are angree—like Portuguese man. 'Ave you a cigarette?"

For the moment he had no retort ready. He extended his case stiffly, and she pounced on it with a little cry of delight. "Oh, thee American cigarettes! I do like them. But America I did not like," she added reflectively as she lit one. "But *si*—in your New York I did spend two years."

"You did? And you didn't like it?" For the moment John Basset was jarred out of his irritation.

"Like it! My God, it is a prizzon—a grey, 'orrible prizzon. 'Thee land of thee free,' you say. 'Thee 'ome of thee brave!' Ah! An' in those streets, the streets the people own, if you fight, gamble wit' dize, drink—if you dance or make love or sing bicos you are 'appy—what 'appen? Policeman will put you in thee jail. No! When you do such things you mos' lock thee door, pull thee shutters—'ide, you brave Americans, bicos soch things are of living, and of everything that is of living you are afraid."

John Basset was recovering his poise again. He smiled tolerantly. "But New York—" he was beginning, when she expelled a scornful puff of smoke and cut him short.

"Ah! You will speak now of bigness, of those 'igh buildings, will you not? Are they 'igher than our mountain? Than 'Ongkong? Your 'orrible subway, is it more beautiful, more comfortable than a rickshaw on the Praya? Ah—an' you Americans! You mos' not wear straw 'at in October, bicos sombodee might laugh at you. You mos' not wear ol' coat bicos sombodee might think you are poor. You mos' not be 'appy on thee street—laugh—be gay—bicos sombodee will think you are fool or dronk. You 'ave 'igh building—yess, but you mos' not look up at it bicos sombodee will think you 'ave not seen it bifor. You are afraid, afraid, alwiz afraid what sombodee will think—afraid of your neighbor—afraid of policeman—afraid of your wife."

She paused thoughtfully, while John Basset stared at her, indignant and incredulous. He gulped, "You didn't think so in 1918, you foreigners—you didn't think we were afraid then."

She smiled. "No. When you went to thee war you did fight like 'ell. But I guess," she added, "that is bicos you are afraid if you do not die you will 'ave to go back to America. Come along, brave man, I show you the way to go back to your ship."

HE OPENED the door of their stateroom, the cool, comfortable stateroom on C deck, with its two beautifully neat white beds, mathematically placed, with the reading lamp between, its long mirrors, its nickel water carafe, its electric fan.

Ellie was sitting in the long chair, reading. He recognized the book as she put it down with a smile. It was *Chats On Early Chinese Porcelains.*

Then, as he stood in the doorway, the look on her face changed slowly. Her mouth opened a little. Her eyes grew round.

"Oh!" she said, and "Oh! John, dearest! What on earth—"

He caught a glimpse of himself in one of the long mirrors. His tie was awry. His face was streaked with sweat and grime, and one lock of hair was plastered amply across his forehead. And the bloodstained bandage about his thumb—

"Why, darling—oh, Ellie, darling—"

Then he was on his knees beside her chair and her cool, sane arms were around his neck, drawing his head down close, and there was a little mixture of tears and laughter in her voice.

"Oh, John—John! You funny, silly, little boy—and I didn't understand. I thought you weren't having a good time, when all the time all you wanted was to go out and have your own kind of fun. And get drunk—and have a fight, you silly darling—like the time you and Rummy Stevens went to the Yale-Harvard game. Oh, and the jade beads! Oh, John—John!" There was a moment while she rocked with clear, tender laughter. "Oh, and you brought me home the beads I wanted so I wouldn't scold. You funny, funny little boy—"

So the trip was saved. And in the starry silence that followed John Basset was so happy that he never once thought of the last thing the Portuguese girl had said before he stepped out of the hot blackness into the lighted Praya.

"—afraid alwiz you will not do the thing all the others do— Monkeys, you Americans—jus' monkeys."

Everybody's Meeting PLACE

Where writers, readers and the editor gather for informal discussion

NOT TO BE TOO SOLEMN

IT WAS just a year ago, in the January, 1926, EVERYBODY'S, that I first introduced myself here. My initial story in the magazine appeared in that issue; and on this same page Oscar Graeve printed my defiant apology for writing it.

Since then he has extended the hospitality of these pages many times. He had a particularly cordial and informal way of doing so, and of making one feel right at home. When the invitation came to succeed him as editor, I was surprised and gratified, but most of all I was happy to take over a job which he had made so friendly. It has always lacked that solemnity which, by a curious tradition, is supposed to go along with the desks, cabinets and other items of editorial furniture. Obviously Oscar Graeve enjoyed the job. And, what is more to the point, the readers enjoyed the magazine. A big file of letters, through which I waded during most of one recent afternoon, gives ample testimony to that.

The day that Oscar Graeve packed up his brief case and moved across the hall, he left behind no pontifical admonitions and commands. There was no need. I know, and he knows I know, that the editor of EVERYBODY'S has only one thing to do—to turn out a magazine of the most entertaining fiction he can find.

The only bit of solemnity permitted to creep into this *Meeting Place* is the solemn assurance that I shall do exactly that.

FURTHER APOLOGIES

I SEE right now where I've got to begin apologizing for another of my stories. And not so defiantly either. It's the yarn called *Out of the Hills* in this current issue.

The facts of the matter are these: I inherited the darn thing. Oscar Graeve bought it quite some time before either of us knew of this change in editorship. It was in the safe and the only way to get rid of it was to print it.

Worse yet, there's another in the next issue. But that exhausts the supply. Thereafter no story in the magazine will call for an apology of any kind.

THE CHEERING SECTION

ONE of my very first editorial duties was the consideration of a novelette by T. T. FLYNN. It was a corking yarn. I took the necessary steps to make sure that it remained right here in the office, and scheduled it for an early issue. Then this letter turned up, and I felt all the righteous glow of satisfaction an editor can possibly achieve.

> **I am glad to accept your invitation to *Everybody's Meeting Place* as I wish to thank you for your very interesting magazine and echo your loud cheer for T. T. Flynn and his *Tin in the Jungle*.**

I have not been reading much serial fiction in late years as, like many others, I have become disgusted with the mushy love stories and lurid sex stuff published. But I was much interested in Flynn's stories of the Blue Ridge Mountains published in the *Chicago Tribune*, so when I saw his name on the September EVERYBODY'S I eagerly bought a copy and gave over my lunch hour to following the fate of Mary Hopkins, for once started there was no stopping until the story had been finished. He certainly knows how to grip his readers, as was later proved again when my brother hurried through dinner in order to finish the yarn.

I was much interested in reading the little sketch of him which you published and in which he confesses to everything except bootlegging and circuit riding. No wonder he knows his stuff and teaches as he writes. I am glad to find a writer who so interests the boys in my family, and while entertaining also teaches them customs and manners of other lands. Give us some more from his pen. He writes with unusual ease and charm.

You are certainly publishing interesting stories and here go my congratulations to EVERYBODY'S!

Miss W. Elizabeth Morse,
Glasgow, Virginia.

THE MORNING'S MAIL

CERTAINLY no duty is more pleasant in an editor's routine than the reading of the morning's mail. A good letter is as welcome as a good story. Frequently it is as valuable. Many thoughtful suggestions come to an editor's desk from an interested and unknown reader. And even a brief note which says no more than a cheery good morning is apt to provide a bright moment in an otherwise dull and cloudy day.

The cloudy days, fortunately, are few. But there is always a schedule to whip into shape, good stories to secure and groom, and a finished magazine to get out in time. After living with a magazine here in the office for weeks on end, we all like to hear how it is getting along out in the world. You folks are the ones to tell us.

And, in this particular case, the new editor is most interested in hearing what you have to say about our magazine.

THOSE DESERT MOON SOLUTIONS

THE Fourth Part of *The Desert Moon Mystery* in the present issue carries on with all of the suspense this remarkable story has created in previous installments. I would like to wager that you have not yet guessed the identity of the murderer. But that is not possible. My predecessor tried it, and exactly five people have sent in correct solutions at this writing. Now this is no ordinary mystery story. How the five did it is beyond me, and also beyond Oscar Graeve, who has sent them copies, duly autographed, of the O. Henry Memorial collection of *The Best Stories of 1926*, in token of his lost wager.

The winners were:

R. Thomas, Portland, Oregon
Emil F. Lowe, LaFayette, Indiana
W. J. Elliott, Southgate, California
Mrs. M. C. Hoffman, Ardmore, Oklahoma
F. B. Lutman, Indianapolis, Indiana

Along with those five, there came a great number of less successful solutions. Most of them, even if incorrect, were exceedingly ingenious.

JOHN HINTON, JUNGLE-WALLAH

YOU have already seen several stories by REGINALD CAMPBELL. They have been very short, and in their very brevity were most artful. Also, you have already heard about this series of stories of the Siamese teak forests. They deserve another word.

Campbell has created a character. Each story is distinct and complete, but in the unique personality of John Hinton they are bound into one fascinating saga of a white man alone in a weird land. A white man, too, who must carry the responsibility of a great venture on his shoulders, and be lord and judge to a simple and childlike people. Campbell has held down the job himself, and knows his stuff from close acquaintance. Elsewhere on these pages you will find a word from Campbell, in which he speaks, in passing, of the five years he spent as jungle-wallah in the teak forests of northern Siam.

Here in the office these stories delighted every one who read them. I am certain you will follow them with pleasure in each issue.

THE NEXT ISSUE

DURING the year past EVERYBODY'S has lined up a number of excellent authors whose stories have come to be welcome on sight. The February magazine has a splendid list of favorites, with a couple of newcomers thrown in for good measure.

There are three novelettes, with CHARLES

WESLEY SANDERS' *The Lone Young 'Un* leading off. It's a darn good Western, and if there happen to be a couple of guns in the story, there are real, honest-to-goodness people wielding them. I found it a thrilling yarn indeed.

L. P. B. ARMIT, new to the magazine, has a novelette of the Ceylon coast pearlers. This story came all the way from Papua, and Armit is one of those writers EVERYBODY'S is most anxious to find: One who knows his stuff by living in the very midst of it. You will find *Between the Tides* full of honest color and suspense.

J. E. GRINSTEAD gives us the remaining novelette, *Black Kettle Mountain*. This is Grinstead's first appearance in the magazine too, but it assuredly will not be his last. Grinstead is well known as a writer of the Southwest country, and I am happy to publish this honestly exciting tale of the Ozarks in EVERYBODY'S.

The list of short stories is one of the best yet. THOMAS THURSDAY writes again of the little-big-top people; RAYMOND SPEARS tells another terse and vivid yarn of the West; L. G. BLOCHMAN gives us more of the adventures of General Joe Thompson of the Chinese Army; MILLARD WARD spins a gripping yarn of the sea; and there are others—every one a first rate tale of action and adventure.

WANDERERS IN FAR PLACES

THERE is another class of mail that comes to an editor's desk which is sheer delight to read. Delight, perhaps, not unmixed with envy. Letters bearing postmarks from Burma, Alaska, Papua, Sonora; letters on which appear, over the date line, glamorously named places like Cape Haitien, Tia Juana, Port Said, São Paulo, Damascus, Port Moresby. There are the places most of us have secretly vowed to visit some day, the while we know how unlikely it is that we shall. There is the day's work to be done, there are ties we cannot loose so easily, there are homes and families. . . .

But some do reach those places. Those there are who live where most of us can only dream. They know, and knowing, can tell us of them. They are the blessed ones whose letters cause an editor to halt mid-stride in his task while the odors of sage or dank jungle or swift salt spray come suddenly to his nostrils.

Two letters lie before me now. Many more bulk heavily in the files, but these are fair examples. Midway in his letter Reginald Campbell says:

> . . . In December I may be going on a trip around Africa and up to Kenya Colony, where I might be able to get some new local color, as, bar Port Said, I don't know Africa at all. I wish, of course, I could go back to the teak forests of Siam again. The jungle has a tremendous pull on one. . . . In England we have had a dreadful summer. No sun at all, and rain, rain practically every day. The only method of getting away from the rain is to conjure up visions of tropical sunshine and write stories about it!

Raoul F. Whitfield, in a very pleasant note, adds:

> . . . In three weeks I am driving to California, via the Old Spanish Trail, stopping off at the Border Air Patrol fields, and getting into Mexico at several points. Shall finish up then, and settle down for six months or so on, perhaps, a small ranch.

Good luck to them! May their wanderings never cease, for in them is the stuff of a thousand great yarns.

WILLIAM CORCORAN.

THE NEWS OF NEXT MONTH

Three Novelettes of Glamour and Action

THE LONE YOUNG 'UN

By CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS

Of a son of the far Western ranges, and his valor and grit in the greatest adventure of his life.

* * * * *

BLACK KETTLE MOUNTAIN

By J. E. GRINSTEAD

This author, a Texas rancher, writes with unusual power and vividness. You will be thrilled by this tale of the Ozarks, his first in EVERYBODY'S.

* * * * *

BETWEEN THE TIDES

By L. P. B. ARMIT

A yarn of pearlers off the Ceylon coast, and of the men who go down into the treacherous depths.

* * * * *

AND SEVERAL CORKING SHORT STORIES

Including another racy tale of the show people by Thomas Thursday; a brief Western with a punch by Raymond S. Spears; an excellent story of the sea by Millard Ward; a second of the "Tales of the Teak Forest" by Reginald Campbell; and others.